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11. The importance of interactions and networks in the nature-based tourism industry

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Abstract

Nature-based tourism (NBT) firms are commercial actors that meet the demand for experiences in nature by activating resources. In this process, interactions with other actors and stakeholders are important. In this chapter, we investigate NBT firms' interactions and identify outcomes of the interactions. The empirical basis comprises semi-structured interviews with managers of 24 NBT firms in three tourism areas in Norway. Our study reveals that interactions with other tourism firms, customers, local groups and organisations benefit product development and deliveries, customer relations, capability development, and network connections. However, interactions are costly in terms of time and resources. Managers must therefore consider the extent and the form of interaction. For example, the importance of interaction may vary with the phase of the business

development and firm size. Local culture, business traditions and the existence of local tourism organisations also influence the significance and potentials for interactions.

Keywords: Nature-based tourism firms; Interactions; Networks; Outcomes; Conditions; Management

Introduction

In this chapter, we investigate the nature of and conditions for interactions in the nature-based tourism (NBT) industry and the outcomes of such interactions. The empirical basis is personal interviews with managers of 24 NBT firms in Norway. In its purest form, interaction can be defined as an action by an actor (A) that evokes a specific response from another actor (B), which is then responded to by actor A (cf. Weick, 1979). Interactions are the building blocks of all organisation and the operations of firms. Over time, interactions lead to the establishment of relationships and the formation of networks, which have consequences for all that are part of the networks. Since many NBT firms are small, it is reasonable to believe that relationships and networks have particular functions for such firms, for example overcoming disadvantages of scale. However, studies in different sectors have shown that relationships and networks are crucial for all types of firms (e.g., Håkansson, Ford et al., 2009).

NBT firms can be defined as actors that provide NBT experiences and are paid for such services (Stensland, Fossgard et al., 2018). Even if these kinds of firms, similar to other firms, pursue goals of an economic nature, managers may also be motivated by social and environmental goals, such as encounters with customers and engagement for nature (Getz and Carlsen, 2005), as well as pursuing a certain lifestyle (Fredman and Tyrväinen, 2010; Lundberg and Fredman, 2012). In sum, it thus seems that the organisation and management of NBT firms are influenced by a diverse set of motivations (Ryan, 2002; Selby, Petäjistö and Huhtala, 2011; see also Chapter 10 of this volume).

The fact that many NBT firms are small with few or no employees (Thomas, Shaw and Page, 2011) and are observed to manage their firms in informal ways (Sampaio, Thomas and Font, 2012) has led researchers to conclude that NBT firms' performance is low (Ateljevic, 2007). For example, Sampaio, Thomas and Font (2012) find that small tourism firms have less capacity to implement environmental certification schemes due to their informal style of management. In their study covering a range of tourism enterprises, Sundbo, Orfila-Sintes and Sørensen (2007) conclude that small firms innovate less than larger, more formally managed firms. This smallness may be overcome by engaging in networks, thereby enhancing performance (Komppula, 2014; Novelli, Schmitz and Spencer, 2006; Petrou, Pantziou et al., 2007). Through cooperation, small firms can become more resilient, i.e. capable of coping with external stresses and disturbances (Adger, 2000) and thriving in the face of changes (Magis, 2010; see also Chapter 5 of this volume). The reason is that networking may provide the firms with access to external tangible and intangible resources (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978; Saxena, 2005; Villanueva, Van de Ven and Sapienza, 2012). Cooperation in informal networks is also perceived as a key to innovation because of the greater degree of flexibility compared to formal networks (Huggins and Thompson, 2015). Concerning marketing, Coviello, Winklhofer and Hamilton (2006) find that the success of small firms in the accommodation sector depends on customer acquisition through interaction-based relationship marketing. Regarding competence, through their interactions, NBT firms can develop knowledge and acquire skills in management, finance, marketing and innovation (Lerner and Haber, 2001).

Beyond the manager's motivation and the firm's scale, the nature of the (tourism) product may also affect how the firm develops relationships and networks. In other words, firms providing new types of tourism products, such as activities and experiences, which is the case for many NBT firms in the

Nordic countries (Lundberg and Fredman, 2012; Stensland, Fossgard et al., 2018), may be more inclined towards innovation than more established firms (Fossgard, 2020). This may especially be the case for firms offering tailored experiences (Novelli, Schmitz and Spencer, 2006). For example, Ateljevic (2007) finds that NBT managers regard product quality as far more important for competitive advantage than (a low) price.

Lastly, the nature of the interactions and the effects of the networks may also be influenced by the geographical context, i.e. natural, cultural and historical peculiarities of the surrounding environment (Ateljevic, 2007; Lerner and Haber, 2001; Ryan, 2002). However, it is unclear to what extent such geographical factors might affect the firms' interactions and the outcomes of such interactions. Therefore, studies on management and networks in various geographical locations are needed.

Data and method

The empirical data for this study were collected from 24 personal, semi-structured interviews with managers of NBT firms in three different geographical areas in Norway (see the Introduction chapter of this volume). Varanger, Trysil and Hardanger represent three types of NBT destinations where the contextual framework and the types of NBT activities differ. Varanger is an arctic and relatively new tourism destination in the eastern part of Northern Norway. Over the past ten years, birding has developed into a major tourism attraction in this area. Trysil is a ski resort in the eastern part of Southern Norway, with many visitors, especially in the winter, predominantly from elsewhere in Norway and Sweden. Hardanger is a fjord area in the western part of Southern Norway representing the "original" and early, national romantic nature-based tourism in Norway, which started in the mid-19th century.

The interviews with managers of NBT firms were conducted between April 2017 and April 2018. Most of the firms can be classified as small (with less than five employees), and typically, many of the managers were also the firms' owners. The interviews were based on an interview guide, where motivation, networks, resources, products, innovation and relations to the local community were the six themes covered. The informants were recruited through the websites of the destination/ visit companies in the three areas, as well as the brochures describing the NBT companies. The selection of managers included representatives from NBT firms in all three locations to ensure a certain geographical coverage, as well as respondents representing a variety of firm sizes. However, except for the interviewees based in Trysil, all interviewees represented small NBT firms (with less than five employees). Most interviews were conducted at the business locations or in a suitable place in the vicinity. Three interviews were done via Skype. Each interview lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. All interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed with the help of the software NVivo. All informants were pseudonymised and quotations mentioned in the text are translated from Norwegian by the authors.

Results

The roles of informal and formal networks

Overall, the NBT actors' motivation was characterised by having identified a business opportunity in the local area that few or no other actors had recognised or that the established actors had neither

believed would represent any potential nor dared to exploit. Many of the managers had observed that few actors utilised the natural resources that mass tourism did not employ, and the managers wanted to contribute to the differentiation of NBT experiences in their areas. Some actors had also developed products based on the desire to utilise unexploited natural resources. Hence, identification of unrealised potentials, including lack of for example guided nature experiences in the area or too few nature-based tourism offerings, constituted an important motive for establishing the business. In order to develop and run these, often small, firms, the managers engaged in various interactions with other actors and participation in collaborative networks.

All the informants took part in some form of informal networks, often with other local actors within tourism. Some also had established relationships with international partners through more formal networks. These contacts were mainly other actors that conducted NBT activities in the same market segment (e.g., fly-fishing), larger communities and international organisations in the relevant NBT sector and/or project partners. Participation in formal networks often concerned specific themes, while informal interaction could be broader in scope. However, one actor pointed out that it was not necessarily a goal to cooperate as long as possible. This standpoint was explained by the fact that when an actor gets something "up and running", it is a good sign if one no longer needs external help.

Several informants pointed out that collaboration with other actors – regionally, nationally and/or internationally – played a key role in business operations. The small-scale actors emphasised cooperation as a driving force for ideas and creative thinking.

You are in it together, somehow. It is the large [firms] who will learn from the small ones. The small ones can also learn from the large ones [...]. They can have new thoughts, other thoughts [...]. They can inspire each other; they can provide input to each other when it comes to a product that is under development.

Most actors talked about and promoted one another, believing that they all shared the common goal of satisfying guests. Spreading information about one another's offerings, capitalising on one another's competencies and establishing joint experience packages was believed not only to benefit the firms, but the whole tourism sector in the region. For example, one actor highlighted the importance of having good relationships with local persons and groups, making tourism part of local community development. The local community in turn was experienced as a positive driver for the tourism industry:

If you make a chain, and it is all strong shackles, you cannot break the chain. However, if it is all pieces of metal, not bound together, it is very easy not to survive.

However, one actor, originally from another European country, did not endorse the alleged experiences of mutual benefits. The actor had found a lack of initiative and interest for cooperation:

So, you are Vikings, born in nature; you have this Viking mentality – meaning independent, on your own. Solving your own issues and problems.

As this actor perceived it, the various business owners were not necessarily competitors. However, they lacked in his opinion an understanding of the fact that they all operated in the same area and that collaboration to develop complementary products would benefit everyone.

Although the NBT firms mainly engaged in informal networks, they also viewed membership in formal networks, such as destination companies and business organisations, as important for developing the firm. This appeared as particularly important for the small-scale actors. These actors

believed that the formal organisations contributed to increased visibility of the firms, as they lacked the capacity or the desire to do comprehensive marketing themselves. The actors emphasised that collaborating across municipal boundaries was crucial for success.

All these small-scale actors are too small to make it big, but at the same time, we provide a product that no one else can provide. And, if you put this together here and merge them, then in Visit Varanger, for example, then you suddenly have established that big concept.

Some actors took a more critical view of such umbrella organisations as Visit Varanger. Formalisation of collaboration among the actors would take both time and effort, and one actor pointed out how time-consuming it had been to find the balance between engaging in common marketing efforts and accomplishing actual sales in the firm. Another manager expressed scepticism that others should market the company, thinking that this was a task for the firm itself to do, building its own brand and digital presence. Despite disagreements about membership in destination organisations, in all three regions, most informants regarded membership in common organisations as beneficial.

Geographical context matters

The importance of networks was also affected by characteristics of the case area. Varanger was the area with the most businesses managed by only one person. Here it was believed to be crucial to have good relationships with others. Being resilient enough to survive, as well as sufficiently visible to attract guests, was perceived as critical. Most NBT actors were unable to accomplish this purely on their own. These actors were concerned about keeping guests in their region for as long as possible, promoting one another and regarding each other as sparring partners. However, managers also considered it a positive sign when they gradually needed less cooperation and were able to stand more “on their own feet.”

In the Trysil area, the small-scale actors thought they had to put extra much work in order to be visible in a tourism context with one dominating company (Skistar). There was also a distinction between the companies located in the tourism centre of the municipality (the resort) and those outside this centre, where the latter actors had to work harder to promote their products and secure visibility. At the same time, Skistar itself was committed to interact mutually beneficially with the other, smaller firms to lay foundations for a positive local community development and viable companies and jobs also outside the ski resort. The interdependence among the small-scale NBT firms contributed to off-season jobs for the employees of the ski-resort, while Skistar on their part put the place (Trysil) on the map. This caused a huge draw to the region, from which the small-scale NBT firms could benefit. In addition, the destination company worked to increase the visibility of all NBT actors in the area, including both small and larger actors:

We have a very clear strategy in relation to the launch of our main products on the market. But both a skier and a cyclist do other activities once they are here. So, we have – our most important job in the wintertime is to highlight all the activities for the skiers who are here.

In the Hardanger area, the actors were also concerned about networking, emphasising that cooperation made everybody stronger, as well as its significance for the overall tourism development in the region. Nevertheless, there were indications that some actors in Hardanger were somewhat busier and more competition oriented than the actors in the other two regions. Possible explanations

for this might be that tourism in this region had its roots far back in time and that many of the actors had considerable competence, leading to the perception that there is less need for cooperation. The NBT industry in the region had many actors in the same segment, and they expressed a need to distinguish themselves among various target groups. Each firm had to pursue something unique and find its niche.

Outcomes of interactions

Hence, in all three case areas most of the actors belonged to strong, formal networks and engaged in weaker, informal relationships. The latter was especially important as most actors desired to develop pre-existing products or expand their services. Expansion was an important goal for some actors, not least because it could mitigate the vulnerabilities of being a small firm. In line with enlargement, one of the micro firms viewed collaboration as an important factor but also found it essential to focus on the opportunity for development even without relying on other business actors:

The public support system should have been much more rigged towards how we can most and as fast as possible target the individual company. Don't [...] always go through some kind of collaborative project or business organisation [...].

This actor believed that business clusters could limit individual companies' ability to develop. Other actors perceived cooperation as the key to further business development. One of the accommodation companies had enough property and space to double its capacity and extend its season. To achieve this, collaboration with other actors was considered as crucial:

We tell other actors about [...] those [actors] who offer experiences, such as now, who have worked with snowmobile safaris in the winter time, for example – we have asked them if they can start quad biking, transportation in the summer, right? Because we have the demand and see what people want. And they have not thought about it. So, we provided them [with] that idea.

Interaction as a mean of product development was of great importance for some actors. Others believed that the business was large enough and that expansion or further development was not manageable for the time being. Others wanted to make their products more visible. However, expanding their tasks and reach a larger market meant being more available daily. This could be challenging for small companies with few employees.

Many of the managers did not regard generating financial returns as the overriding goal but developing the business into a way of life where the demand for the product would be sufficient to secure an income, eventually in combination with other activities. In this effort, several of the small-scale NBT firms appeared as offensive engaging in various informal interactions. This opened room for dynamic and flexible development processes. This stands somewhat in contrast to the larger firms. For example, the main actor in the Trysil area participated in more formal networks, where securing stability seemed to take higher priority than radical product development.

Discussion

The findings reported above illustrate that interactions with "others" are important for the central functions of the NBT firms. But the picture is varied. "Others" constitute a heterogeneous category,

including individuals, organisations and other tourism firms. Moreover, the interactions vary in intensity, from what could be termed "thin" interactions, such as simply exchanging a product for money, to "thicker" forms of interactions, such as when many actors in an area develop joint product packages gradually over time. This varied and changing role of interaction is not restricted to the tourism sector but has also been observed in other firms and sectors (Håkansson, Ford et al., 2009). We can use these authors' perspective on business networks to sort out the outcomes of the interactions that we can observe among the NBT firms.

First, interaction affects NBT products. The informants mention various examples. One aspect is that through interaction, providers of NBT experiences in a local area can establish attractive portfolios of products (product packages) (Nybakk and Hansen, 2008; Rønningen, 2010; Tolstad, 2014). This requires a certain complementarity of the products, which is not possible to achieve unless there is a minimum of interaction among the actual actors (Everett and Slocum, 2012; Meyer-Cech, 2005). A frequently used label for such a process is co-creation (see, e.g., Forbord, 2005; Prebensen and Foss, 2010). Another aspect is the role of interactions with customers for product development. Through extensive contacts with customers, providers can acquire ideas for product development, as well as improvements. The customers here may not only be individuals but also firms, such as the transport company Hurtigruten, which buys experiences from smaller NBT suppliers along the Norwegian coast (Auestad, 2018). Being a chosen supplier to such a professional buyer provides particular opportunities to improve and develop products (cf. the role of "lead users"; von Hippel, 1988).

Second, the firms that we have observed interact with their customers (market aspect), where the exchange of products for money is an obvious example. However, many of the firms interact more extensively with their customers. One aspect is that customers in some cases are returning visitors and hence have contacts with the firms many times. Through such interactions over time, relationships are built between firms and customers, leading to (among other things) re-purchase, which has economic effects for both parties. Another observation is that "thick" interactions with customers contribute to quality in product delivery. In general, the value of service products (e.g. experiences) depends on the quality of the encounters between the provider and the customer (Lundberg, 2011; Mossberg, 2008), but there are gradual nuances, from pure material consumption to active customer participation (Smith, 1994). Another way to facilitate marketing of NBT products is through formal organisations at local or regional levels. However, the results illustrate that it is not obvious how such organisations should be organised and by whom.

Third, through various "encounters" with "others" in general terms, NBT firms develop their capabilities (Camisón and Monfort-Mir, 2012; Loasby, 1998), such as competencies among staff and organisational structure. Many of the managers mention such effects of interactions. Some describe the effects as making the firms more resilient. This aspect of business interaction is further supported by the fact that many of the firms' representatives in our study mention competence as their most important resource, above natural and cultural resources. This further demonstrates that having contacts with others and building relationships not only impact the firms' performance but their very existence. However, some managers report that cooperation with others is the most important aspect in the initial phase of the business and that at later stages, when they have increased their competence, they prefer to act more independently.

This leads to the fourth and last function of interaction. The empirical examples show that no firm interacts with only one part. The firms interact with many other counterparts, in space and over time (Håkansson, Ford et al., 2009). However, the type and amount of relationships matter. It has been

found that a multitude of weaker ties is more effective than few and strong ties (e.g. to friends and family), since the former provides access to a wider set of information and complementary resources (Granovetter, 1973; Greve and Foss, 1990). Hence, being part of networks is a weighty asset. This opens the question of how to manage and hopefully gain from a multitude of relationships (Håkansson, Ford et al., 2009), as described in the result section. One benefit may be the facilitation of creativity (Baggio, 2014; Fuchs and Baggio, 2017). Another example is the importance of the firms' contacts with local persons and groups, thereby increasing awareness and support from the local community. This can be achieved in different ways, such as publishing information in the local media and creating summer jobs for the children of local inhabitants. In general, a firm can gain advantages from its relationships and strategic position in a network because these create opportunities to activate human, financial and other resources (Burt, 1992; Villanueva, Van de Ven and Sapienza, 2012). This is interesting, given that the major motivation for establishing the NBT firms is to fill an uncovered need in their areas by activating unused resources.

Although the studied NBT firms interact extensively with one another and others, there are limits regarding interaction. This can be explained by the fact that interaction is costly, takes time, may involve monetary costs and can sometimes be conflictual. Therefore, the firms will interact in a way they find rewarding. However, to the extent that interaction concerns development (e.g. of a product package), it is not always obvious how much time and resources an actor should allocate to interaction, what parties to interact with and in what form. Even if such innovation processes are "risky businesses", it could be even more risky not to engage in them and to stick to interacting internally only. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the NBT firms studied, many of them being very small, interact extensively with others. In such interactions, the firms demonstrate creativity and enthusiasm. This finding aligns with those of other studies on NBT firms; for example, Fossgard (2020) emphasises the importance of the providers' dedication and enthusiasm. Much of this creative and engaged interaction takes place informally. Hence, it could be speculated that the small size of a firm provides particular advantages in innovation processes (Håkansson, Ford et al., 2009). In our case, this observation on innovative interaction may also be due to the type of product (nature experiences) and development phase or age of the firm. Given another tourism product (e.g. accommodation) and/or more established firms, we may have observed less intense and/or more formal types of interactions. For example, Sundbo, Orfila-Sintes and Sørensen (2007) find that larger tourism firms are more innovative than smaller ones. This finding may be associated with the type of tourism activities offered by the firms, which mostly concern accommodation. Moreover, innovation processes in large firms are often more formally organised and may therefore be more visible and easier to measure (Camisón and Monfort-Mir, 2012).

Even if many of the relationships of the small NBT firms are informal, they also beneficially engage in formal networks, such as marketing organisations. In sum, it is not always the case that actors should interact extensively ("thick" interaction). In some cases there are good reasons to establish standards or make plans so that the need for extensive, mutual interaction is reduced (Thompson, 1967). The role of money in facilitating exchange provides a good example of a standard. A slightly different example is expressed by one informant in Hardanger, who wanted to cooperate more with other local actors but was met with ignorance. These last examples show that interactions are conditioned by structural and cultural factors. A tourism marketing board or branch organisation can then be established to facilitate local interaction and build connections to networks outside the region, while cultural factors affecting interactions seem more challenging to alter.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have investigated the role of interactions in nature-based tourism. Based on the data from personal interviews with managers of NBT firms at three tourism destinations in Norway, combined with insights from the literature on organisations and business networks, we have identified several forms of interaction, with four main types of outcomes. These concern products, customer relations, capability building and network connections. First, through interactions with suppliers and other tourism enterprises, NBT firms can co-create tourism products and attractive combinations of products. Second, through interactions with customers, who can be individuals, as well as organisations, NBT firms secure and extend tourism experiences and potentially long-lasting relationships with customers. Interactions with customers, not least the demanding ones, can also lead to product development and improvement. Third, actions towards and responses from other actors may lead to the improvement of internal capabilities and competencies in the firms. Finally, yet importantly, through interactions with others, NBT firms connect to larger networks. Connections and positions in the networks increase the possibilities for activating human, financial and other resources. Since interactions are costly, over time, managers must reflect on how and with whom they interact and what they gain from various interactions. The possibilities for interactions are conditioned by local structures and cultures, such as traditions in tourism, social and entrepreneurial cultures and the presence of local marketing organisations.

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