

JUDIT SULYOK & TÜNDE VAJDA
OFF TO SPAS PROJECT

Ageing population is a widely discussed phenomenon. Supporting seniors' healthy and active lifestyle, a wide range of products and services are aimed at serving elder age groups' needs. Travelling with tourism purposes is among one of the popular activities of seniors in developed countries. Acknowledging tourism's benefits, the European Union is also supporting programmes with the objective of developing new tourism products, new tourism flows. In the framework of the COSME programme (co-funded by the EU), projects have been initiated with the main objective fostering tourism flows during the off-season period. This can help not only to raise the quality of life of the involved travellers, but can result a better use of tourism capacities, and a more balanced tourism performance of destinations. One of the COSME programme is the Off to Spas project (676737/COSME) that aims creating a new health tourism product in the Central European countries attractive for senior tourists during the off-season period.

Introduction

The *Off to Spas* project aims at creating new, thermal water related international health tourism products (international balneology product) in the spa towns of Central Europe that could serve as a main attraction in order to bring seniors to these regions in the low tourism seasons. The project is co-funded by the European Union (676737/COSME Programme).

The project is realized by an international consortium, including the following partners:

- University of Pannonia (Veszprém, Hungary);
- AGE Platform Europe (Belgium);
- Tourism Non-profit Ltf. of Hévíz (Hungary);
- Consilul Judetean Covasna/Covasna County Council (Romania);
- Asociatia pentru Desvoltarea Turismului in Judetul Covasna/Covasna Tourism Association (Romania);
- Travel Specialist Group Sweden AB (Sweden);
- Zala County Government (Hungary).

In the framework of the Off to Spas project, two central European health tourism destinations – Hévíz (Hungary) and Covasna (Romania) – are represented. Both

places are very rich in natural treasures and healing sources based on balneological assets which are perfect tools to raise the quality of life of seniors.

The project period is from August 2015 to November 2016.

Main goals of the project

In accordance with the European Union's strategy to foster low/medium season tourism (COSME Programme), the main objectives of the project were:

- Encourage a better cooperation and increased agreements among different actors of the health tourism value chain and seniors associations/organisations with elaborating a new, international balneology tourism product network focused on off-season, and custom tailored to seniors specific needs;
- To make more benefit for tourism SMEs by increasing the number of tourism flows during the low and medium seasons and professionalization of tourism service providers;
- Communication and promotion of tourism as a strategy for active and healthy ageing;
- Facilitate accessibility in tourism offers, along with intermodal transfer and transnational connectivity;
- Foster the construction of innovative health insurance policies in order to make the product sustainable and self-developing in the future.

In order to generate new tourism flows, new jobs, new opportunities for regional growth the following actions are taken:

- Creating a new, international balneology tourism product network which offers site and market specific curing, health promotion and leisure programmes for seniors;
- Implementing a medium to long term strategy for self-sustainable tourism products for seniors, that takes into account the dynamic approach of the product offer (i.e. the rapid changing shape of economic and social realities affecting seniors, currently and in the medium-long term);
- Senior market analysis, surveys, comparative analysis, evidence-gathering, analysis of the senior market and balneology issue studies;
- Local resource based and market-oriented re-positioning of the complementary spa destinations in order to find new aspects in the field of co-operations;
- Holding discussion platforms, workshops and other events for networking and partnering activities and for exchanging good practices;
- Capacity-building for senior tourism professionals, service suppliers;

- Creating awareness raising events and communication programmes of the project and the international balneology product;
- Fostering and facilitating the negotiations amongst the state-owned and private health insurance companies and health-related tourism services, building promotional and communication campaigns on it.

Target groups

The Off to Spas project focused on the wide range of the involved stakeholders, acknowledging the complexity of the health tourism value chain. From the supply side, tourism SMEs are in the main focus of the project, furthermore regional and local public authorities, and spa towns/destinations are important actors. The project's activities aim seniors and seniors associations from the demand side. In order to efficiently reach the objectives, regional and local public authorities, health insurance companies, health related organisations, tourism development bodies, and European associations are also addressed.

The communication activities aim to reach all the target groups with different and specialised contents and the appropriate and relevant dissemination ways (Tab. 1).

Table 1: Off to Spas target groups and activities (Source: Off to Spas project)

Supply side	
Tourism SMEs	Research Creation of service portfolio B2B study tours Pilot travellers Product evaluation
Regional and local public authorities	Research One-on-one meetings Conferences Creation of service portfolio
Spa towns, spa associations	Research Knowledge transfer
Demand side	
Seniors	Research Marketing communication & promotion Pilot test Product evaluation

Senior associations	Research Marketing communication & promotion B2B study tours Product evaluation
Other	
Health insurance companies	Research One-on-one meetings Conferences B2B study tours Creation of service portfolio
Health related organizations	One-on-one meetings B2B study tours
Regional/national tourism development bodies	One-on-one meetings Dissemination
European associations	Conferences Dissemination

Activities performed

The health tourism product development process included a wide range of activities from research to monitoring, and was supported by the active marketing communication of the involved partners (Fig. 1).

The project is realized with the support of five ‘work packages’. One work package is dedicated to the technical and financial administration that enables the high quality performance of the activities, and the excellent cooperation among the project partners. The next work package includes all the communication activities related to the project and the new health tourism product. Another work packages focuses on the product development itself (covering research and creation of service portfolio), and one focuses on the pilot testing. The last work package involves the evaluation and the fine-tuning.

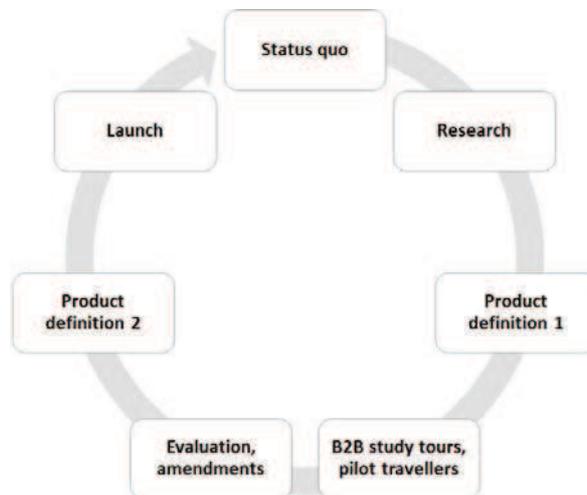


Figure 1: Off to Spas tourism product development process (Source: Off to Spas project)

In order to identify the real potential of a new tourism product, and in order to reach the target market, the good quality and reliable information is of cutting edge role. In this framework, a comprehensive research activity supported the Off to Spas project. Besides analysing the secondary information, the primary research covered surveys among potential travellers, and stakeholders. In both cases, the country-of-origin and the destination approach was also used. Besides this, some selected best practices (Balkan Wellbeing, Alpine Wellness, Portoroz/Slovenia, Sopot/Poland, Parnu/Estonia) has been studied (Fig. 2).

Furthermore, the monitoring of the marketing activities, the one-on-one meetings with key stakeholders, and the outcomes of the project meetings also enriched the realization of the project.

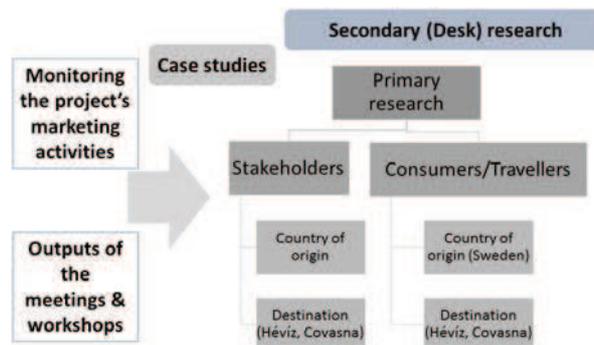


Figure 2: Off to Spas research activities (Source: Off to Spas project)

Based on the outcomes of the research and on the available information, the first version of the new health tourism product has been defined. Representative of seniors' associations and health related organizations were invited (B2B study tours) in order to test the new offer.

For the potential travellers (pilot test), the new product has been actively promoted by the project partners' communication and promotion channels (e.g. websites).

Based on the feedbacks of travellers, the final product has been identified, and launched at the Off to Spas final conference (to be held in November 2016 in Hévíz/Hungary). With the aim of targeting the best potential stakeholders, the conference is organized together with the annual meeting of the Hungarian Balneological Association.

Results achieved, outlook for the future

The health tourism product development process realized in the framework of the Off to Spas project resulted important conclusions and implications for the future developments, and for the estimated impacts on longer term (Fig. 3).

An important added value is that the project highlights the need for understanding visitors' needs. In the case of health tourism, the social-cultural background (e.g. natural healing assets available at the country of origin, attitudes towards health and travel) are of outstanding importance when coming to an international travel with health tourism purpose.

The perception problems, the lack of awareness (especially in the case of Covasna/Romania) does effect the success of new offers. In order to maximize the potential, general tourism information and attractions should be also communicated, accompanied by the health tourism services.

The concept of health tourism has been widened during the last decades, medical treatments outside of home are more popular. However, in the case of the Off to Spas project, the conclusion is that there is a strong emphasis on the 'experience', and the improved health condition is rather a 'side effect'. An important challenge is that how to reach the benefits of the natural healing assets (e.g. thermal water or moffetta) during a shorter stay (e.g. one week).

Although the project did significant steps in cooperation between the health and the tourism sector, further common think-tank and cooperation is needed. One area could be supporting evidence-based research that can be efficiently communicated for potential customers via the tourism stakeholders' marketing and sales channels.



Figure 3: Off to Spas project conclusions (Source: Off to Spas project)

References

COSME website – www.offtopas.eu

Project partners

University of Pannonia, project coordinator (Veszprém, Hungary) – www.gtk.uni-pannon.hu

AGE Platform Europe (Belgium) – www.age-platform.eu

Tourism Non-profit Ltf. of Hévíz (Hungary) – www.heviz.hu

Covasna County Council (Romania) – www.kovasznamegyetanacsa.ro

Covasna Tourism Association (Romania) – www.iranyharomszek.ro

Travel Specialist Group Sweden AB (Sweden) – www.vegaresor.se

Zala County Government (Hungary) – www.zala.hu

Off to Spas Project Team



Partners from left to right:

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Judit Sulyok is a senior lecturer at the Department of Tourism, Faculty of Business and Economics, University of Pannonia, since 2015. She graduated as an Economist specialized in Tourism at the College of Commerce, Catering and Tourism in Budapest in 2001. She got her MSc degree at the University of Pécs. Her PhD research focused on the Lake Balaton and its branding. She has experience in working in tourism practice, as well. Before joining the University of Pannonia, she worked as a researcher at the Hungarian Tourism Ltd. for several years where she got experience in international cooperation, in organization of conferences, and in other marketing communication activities, as well.

She teaches health tourism, problemsolving, strategic destination marketing, and regional marketing. On behalf of the University of Pannonia, she has been one of the coordinators (technical) of the Off to Spas project.

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Tünde Vajda is the head of Centre for Communications at the Faculty of Business and Economics, University of Pannonia. She graduated as a Human Resource Manager in 2009, and got her master's degree two years later at the University of Pannonia as an Economist in Leadership and Management. She is employed at the University since 1999 in different fields of administration. The main stream of her recent work is cooperation with the stakeholders of the Faculty. The Centre for Communications is responsible for the corporate relations, recruitment activity, marketing activity and international relations. She works in projects since 2011, has a great experience in project administration and coordination. Faculty of



Business and Economics has an open eyes to EU funded projects to cooperate with other actors of scientific life providing focus on their own research area and letting influence by other skills and experiences. Results of the different projects are always built in the development strategies offering open-minded and modern approach to researchers, lecturers and students as well. On behalf of the University of Pannonia, she has been one of the coordinators of the Off to Spas project.

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