

Evaluating Marketing Strategies for Promoting Health Tourism

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Abstract

The present study undertakes to evaluate marketing strategies influencing health tourism in Iran. Globalization of health care issues necessitates precise management in order to satisfy requirements of health tourism. Health tourism consists of individuals or groups that travel for therapeutic purposes or climatic changes. It is a type of tourism happening in more than 24 hours and less than a year to maintain or improve physical or mental health of an individual. Considering widespread and increasing popularity of tourism industry, and Iran's great potential for medical treatments, new specialized medical health centers have been developed in the recent years to promote national capacity to receive travelers from Azerbaijan, Nakhjevan, Iraq and other countries. Profitability and revenues obtained by this industry makes research a priority in this field. Population of the study includes Iraqi tourists that enter the country from borders of West Azerbaijan Province to have medical treatment in Iran. 280 samples were randomly selected and interviewed. A questionnaire of 10 items was designed for obtaining their reasons for travelling to Iran and weaknesses and strengths of Iran's medical services. Also, their suggestions for improving these services were elicited. Results indicate that majority of them they travel to Iran for low prices of treatments and have relative satisfaction of services. However, they don't like restaurants since Iranian foods don't agree with their tastes. They also stated no dissatisfaction about being delayed in the borders, and complained about receiving no advertisement for treatment from Iranian counterpart. Finally, the following suggestions are presented for developing marketing strategies in this regard: changing social attitudes towards Iraq, which is in Iran's neighborhood and is close to its culture and traditions; establishing advertising infrastructure in Iraq's cities to encourage people to pursue medical treatments in Iran; conducting studies on food passions of people from Iraq and building restaurant with special staff that are familiar with their culture and traditions; facilitating easy entry and exit procedures in the customs.

Keywords: medical treatment, tourism, strategy, marketing

1. Introduction

Health tourism is considered to be basis for developments in European tourism. It began first in Rome, but declined soon. However, poor hygienic conditions of many cities in 16th and 17th centuries helped revive this industry. In modern France, health centers are highly equipped and renewed. Also, health farms are spreading in Europe and America, where men and women travel to lose weight. Traveling abroad to receive health services provided by international well-known institutes is a new form of health tourism (Karami, 2012). Medical tourism plays a significant role in making profits in many countries, reaching to \$40-50.000.000 in Europe and America. Nevertheless, this industry is not firmly established in Iran. In fact, medical tourism was first marked by Ministry of Health in 2003. Although the ministry was primarily concerned with making job opportunities for medical students rather than promoting health tourism, medical tourism was independently established in 2004 as a result of integrating Cultural Heritage and Iran Touring & Tourism organizations. Based on the 4th development plan, the government was supposed to provide for 30% of medical requirements through exports of medical goods and services (Heidarzadeh et al., 2007). The problem is lack of new marketing strategies for introducing medical services in the country. Iran possesses high potentials in terms of medical tourism in the region, but Turkey has turned to be the major destination for medical tourists. Accordingly, factors on health tourist attractions in the industry need to be evaluated. The present study examines marketing strategies for promoting health tourism.

2. Health Tourism

It is defined as individuals or groups that travel to receive therapeutic treatment (using mineral water and recovery) and to experience a different climatic condition (Arellano, 2011). World Tourism Organization (2000) defines health tourism as the use of services to improve health or keep one's spirits in places outside one's usual environment for more than 24 consecutive hours. Changes in consumer values, aging of population, and the need for medical services are

some causes of health tourism, making it the prevailing current form of tourism. High potential of Iran in this regard made Cultural Heritage and Handcrafts & Tourism organizations to form a special committee in order to exploit and support this emerging and competitive market.

Tourism industry is experiencing rapid development (Joppe, 2011), and ranks as the second profitable industry. In this regard, health tourism is of great importance and, according to the World Bank, is the third field of investment in the world. In 2004, financial turnover from enterprises related to medical tourism industry was about \$40 billion, reaching \$75 billion in 2012. However, only 4-7% of foreign tourism is related to health tourism, which is usually for prevention or recovery from an illness and entices the tourist to travel to other countries to enjoy natural places (hot springs, curative marshes) and unnatural centers (such as specialized hospitals).

3. Factors on health tourism

Four main items need to be taken into account when dealing with medical tourism and attracting health tourists: capacity of medical practitioners, up-to-date technology and international standards, treatment economy and expenses, internal regulations of countries. Compared to its neighboring countries, Iran, and particularly Azerbaijan region, is highly advantageous in terms of the mentioned items. Nevertheless, no solid attempts have been tried to broadcast this potential and the state media and embassies can take on significant roles. Medical tourism industry is rated above gold and petroleum industries in international scenes, as it is both lucrative and low-cost. However, attracting tourists is not the only focus of attempts here; rather, it is urgent to promote social, political, scientific and regional status of the country and Azerbaijan region (Altés, 2005).

Khademolaemmeh argues that attracting health tourists requires building infrastructures and systematic planning in cooperation with the government, insurance institutes and a well-structured marketing strategy to compensate for past shortcomings. Saeed Abdolhoseini, head of International Health Tourism Association, believes that despite optimal health services

provided in the country, no subtle earnings are obtained from health tourism. Given the considerable earnings from tourism, more efficient efforts need to be directed in this field. Uninformed staff, who underperform in attracting and guiding tourists, in low-quality health centers and astronomical expenses of keeping these stations are some major drawbacks of health tourism in Iran that negatively impact its reputation.

Glynos et al. (2006) proposed five factors as main reasons for increasing the desire for seeking foreign health services: familiarity, availability, expenses, quality, and morality (international trips for abortions, treating infertility, and euthanasia). Some people receive medical services when they return to their own countries. Some forms of treatments may not be available in the country of origin or require new techniques and technologies. Also, some special cures may be illegal in the country of origin. The inclination to keep privacy and the desire for integrating tourist attractions such as hotels, weather, and culture with medical trends are likely to be important factors in development of this industry (Orlando, 2007). McReady et al. (2007) identified necessary factors related to promoting medical tourism policy with an emphasis on moral considerations and the quality of legal healthcare. The study revealed that systematic data on health services are rare and different countries have various and unique ways of providing services. The following factors are recognized to be influential in attracting health tourism:

- Low costs of surgery and medical services
- Financial facilities and insurance
- International standards on health and wellbeing
- Considering standards on medical services and patients' welfare
- Facilities for easy travelling to the target country (no visa requirement, easy conditions for obtaining visa and customs facilities)
- Discipline and punctuality in medical services provision in the target hospital and decreasing waiting time

- Controlling local and regional infectious diseases
- Communicating hospitals' quality and post-operative cares to patients and tourists
- Using new and up-to-date technologies in medical services
- Favorable climatic conditions and tourist attractions of the target country

4. Medical tourism in Iran

Research in health tourism industry is scarce. Hamid Rafiee conducted a study on health tourism in Yazd to obtain rate of bed occupancy by native patients and the vacant capacity to receive foreign patients. Also, he investigated investments in the industry such as Mohammad Health Tourism Complex, Bam Taft Tourist Destination, Fahraj Tourist Destination, Healthy Heart Center in Mehriz, Morteza Ali Hot Spring in Tabas. The author found that health tourism in Iran needs to be coordinated since it is a cross-institutional issue and many agents are involved, including Cultural Heritage, Handcrafts & Tourism, Ministry of Health, Medical Treatment and Education, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Department of welfare.

Farhangpour studied strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats of tourism in Iran. She sought to provide a solution through strategic management in order to turn these strengths to opportunities and minimize threats to turn them to strengths. She states that the first step in this regard is to change attitudes, particularly that of statesmen, to eradicate oil & Gas dependent mentality as resources of national income. The new industry will yield great earnings with low costs. Then, based on high potentials of some provinces in tourist attraction, they can be turned to strong and active tourist destinations.

Kazemi (2007) studied factors on medical tourist attraction in Iran and stressed the importance of this industry. Considering the fact that geographical conditions of Iran in the borders affect tourism attraction, she realized that suitable performance of different organizations is influential here. Kazemi also found precise planning and policy of private and state organizations as key factors on improving the industry. Thus, the present study undertakes to

evaluate performances of interested organizations and extracting marketing factors on health tourism attracting in Iran.

5. Methodology

The present study is a basic research conducted on surveys. Population of the study includes all Iraqi patients traveling to Iran to receive medical services. Based on random sampling method, a total number of 280 samples are selected and interviewed. Cochran formula is used for calculating sample size, which is estimated to be 380 at maximum. A questionnaire is used in interviews for collecting the required data. Research questions fit in two categories: the first for determining general information like gender, age, marital status, education, and the second for realizing strengths and weaknesses, consisting 15 questions. Exponential methodology is used for testing reliability, while using descriptive statistics for analyzing data collected from questionnaires.

6. Results

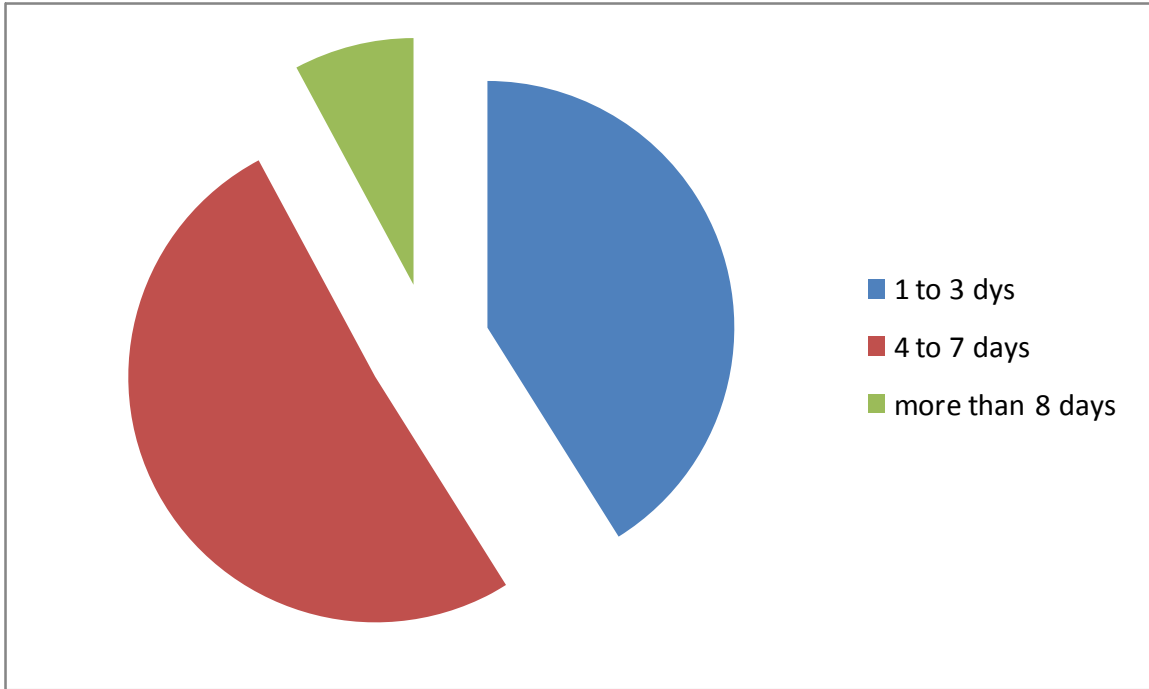
Q₁: how often do you travel to Iran? Results indicate that patients travel to Iran once a year.

Fig 1. Traveling frequency of health tourists



Q₂: how long do you stay in each time? Results indicate that samples stay for about a week in Iran.

Fig 2. Residency frequency of health tourists



Q₃: where do you stay? According to results, 113 interviewees stay with their relatives because borders of Iran accommodate Kurdish people who share the same culture and language with their Iraqi counterparts.

Fig 3. Resorts frequency



Results of Q₅ to Q₁₀ revealed that Iraqi patients have to get through a long and time-consuming process in order to acquire one-month visa from Iran's embassy in Soleimaniyeh and Arbil to travel to Iran. This demotivates 50% of them from pursuing medical services in Iran. Results also showed that Iraqi patients are inclined towards Iranians since they took refuge in the time of war and the two countries share similar culture and tradition. On the other hand, 80% of Iran's southwest provinces speak Kurdish. In general, 65% of patients were satisfied with services, though some didn't like the way they were treated by hospital authorities and secretaries. However, they didn't find transportation as safe as their modern transportation system. Patients turned to be in the range of 40-70 years old and 85% of them didn't go sightseeing because of lack of facilities, information and adequate tourist attractions. Moreover, youngsters avoid travelling to Iran since they are not satisfied with recreational facilities in Iran. They also complained about lack of advertisement about medical treatments in Iran, while other countries in the region (Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, and India) have active presence in Iraq.

7. Suggestions

The study concludes by the following suggestions for improving marketing strategies to promote health tourism: changing social attitudes towards Iraq, which is in Iran's neighborhood and is close to its culture and traditions; establishing advertising infrastructure in Iraq's cities to encourage people to pursue medical treatments in Iran; conducting studies on food passions of people from Iraq and building restaurant with special staff that are familiar with their culture and traditions; facilitating easy entry and exit procedures in the customs; providing recreational facilities and tourist attractions; supplying safe transportation system for passengers; establishing more medical and welfare centers in western borders.

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