

MARKETING TOURISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY: STRATEGY, SUSTAINABILITY, AND SUCCESS

Dr. Arockiamary R

Assistant Professor, School of Management Studies,
Sathyabama Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai.

arockiamary.r.soms@sathyabama.ac.in

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Abstract

Tourism marketing in the twenty-first century bears little resemblance to the methods that once dominated the industry. The earlier approach – rooted in brochures, one-way messaging, and generic promotional appeals – has given way to a far more dynamic and demanding landscape. Today’s travelers are informed, discerning, and increasingly aware of the social and environmental consequences of their journeys. In response, destinations and tourism enterprises have shifted toward strategies grounded in digital engagement, behavioral insight, and long-term sustainability.

*This chapter, *Marketing Tourism in the 21st Century: Strategy, Sustainability, and Success*, examines how these shifts have reshaped the way destinations communicate value and build relationships with visitors. It organizes the discussion around three connected pillars. The first, **Strategy**, focuses on the movement from simple promotion to intentional curation – supported by data analytics, omnichannel communication, and crisis-ready planning. The second, **Sustainability**, highlights the essential role of environmental stewardship, cultural respect, and equitable economic participation in modern tourism. The third, **Success**, reframes achievement by prioritizing visitor quality, community well-being, brand integrity, and regenerative growth.*

The chapter proposes an Integrated Tourism Marketing (ITM) Matrix to help align actions with strategic priorities, sustainability commitments, and measurable outcomes. Real-world scenarios, including the global challenge of overtourism, demonstrate the need for balanced approaches that protect both visitor experience and destination resilience. Overall, the chapter argues that sustainable thinking is no longer an optional add-on but the foundation of effective marketing. It offers practitioners and scholars a pathway for ensuring that tourism continues to foster economic opportunity, cultural vitality, and environmental responsibility in an era of rapid global change.

Introduction:

The End of the Brochure Era

For a long time, tourism marketing followed a predictable and uncomplicated script. Destinations relied on glossy brochures, attractive photographs, and promotional slogans that promised sunshine, relaxation, and escape. These materials were distributed through travel agencies, magazines, and billboards, and the goal was straightforward: attract as many visitors as possible. In that era, success was measured almost entirely by tourist arrivals, and the underlying assumption was that more visitors automatically meant better outcomes for destinations and businesses.

That world has changed dramatically.

The twenty-first century introduced a series of disruptions – technological, environmental, and social – that fundamentally altered how people travel and how they choose their destinations. The rise of digital platforms replaced brochures with interactive websites, online reviews, and social media storytelling. Climate change heightened public

awareness of tourism's environmental footprint. The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped expectations around safety, crowding, and mobility. Combined with growing interest in meaningful and culturally sensitive travel, these shifts have transformed the tourist from a passive recipient of marketing messages into an active participant who seeks authenticity, responsibility, and value beyond the surface.

Today's traveler does not simply consume information; they compare, question, and co-create their experience. They look for destinations that align with their personal values and are increasingly willing to choose places that demonstrate environmental responsibility, cultural respect, and long-term planning. As a result, the old marketing playbook—focused mainly on promotion—no longer holds. Destinations now require a strategic approach built on understanding behavior, managing expectations, and nurturing trust.

This chapter is grounded in the belief that **modern tourism marketing and sustainability can no longer operate as separate domains**. In fact, they reinforce one another. Effective marketing today must anticipate the needs of travelers, communities, and ecosystems simultaneously. Likewise, sustainability gains visibility and strength when communicated effectively through marketing. The three pillars introduced in this book—**Strategy, Sustainability, and Success**—are therefore presented not as isolated themes but as interconnected components shaping the future of tourism.

What follows is an exploration of how destinations can navigate this complex environment with clarity and purpose. By embracing digital intelligence, responsible practices, and balanced metrics of achievement, the industry can move toward a model of tourism that is resilient, equitable, and genuinely enriching for both visitors and the people who host them.

The Strategic Pillar: From Promotion to Curation

Marketing in the tourism sector has entered an era in which strategy demands far more than persuasive messaging. The focus has shifted from simply attracting visitors to carefully shaping the kinds of experiences destinations want to offer—and the kinds of travelers they hope to engage. In this context, strategy becomes an exercise in **curation**, where every decision is guided by insight, intentionality, and long-term thinking.

1. Using Data to Understand Travelers More Deeply

In earlier decades, tourism campaigns were often built on intuition or broad assumptions about visitor preferences. Today, such an approach is no longer sufficient. The modern traveler leaves behind a rich digital footprint, offering clues about motivations, expectations, and behavior. Destinations now rely on analytics tools that track search patterns, booking trends, online reviews, and sentiment across social media platforms. These insights allow marketers to identify emerging niches—such as wellness-oriented tourists, remote-working professionals, or culturally immersive travelers—and tailor experiences that speak directly to their needs. Data does not replace creativity, but it offers a clearer understanding of where value lies and how destinations can position themselves responsibly.

2. Crafting an Omnichannel Journey

Tourism marketing now unfolds across multiple digital touchpoints that influence travelers long before they arrive at a destination. Inspiration might begin on Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube, where visuals and personal narratives shape aspirations. Research then moves to travel blogs, review platforms, and comparison engines, where authenticity and transparency matter more than polished advertisements.

A strong strategy ensures that a destination's story remains coherent from start to finish—across websites, apps, social platforms, customer service channels, and even on-site experiences. Consistency builds trust, and responsiveness encourages engagement. In effect, the visitor journey becomes a continuous conversation, rather than a one-time transaction.

3. Preparing for Crises and Building Resilience

Over the past two decades, the tourism industry has learned that uncertainty is the norm. Terror attacks, financial downturns, health emergencies, natural disasters, and political instability have repeatedly disrupted travel on a global scale. As a result, resilience has become a central component of strategic planning.

Destinations now invest in crisis communication systems that provide timely, transparent information. They develop recovery campaigns that rebuild confidence and highlight safety measures without resorting to fear-based messaging. At the same time, long-term resilience requires cultivating a brand known for reliability—one that reassures travelers that their well-being is a priority, even in turbulent times.

4. Strategy as Purposeful Curation

Taken together, these elements signal a fundamental shift: strategy today is not merely about increasing visibility but about **designing meaningful, responsible, and context-aware experiences**. It involves selecting the right audiences, setting realistic expectations, managing capacity, and ensuring that tourism complements local values and capacities.

By curating the narrative rather than simply promoting a destination, tourism marketers can align their goals with community aspirations and environmental limits. This approach strengthens both the visitor experience and the destination's long-term viability.

The Sustainability Pillar: The Non-Negotiable Core

Sustainability has moved from the periphery of tourism discussions to the heart of every serious marketing and development strategy. What was once treated as a specialized branch—often labelled “eco-tourism”—has now become a baseline expectation. Travelers, policymakers, and communities increasingly insist that tourism grow in a manner that protects natural ecosystems, respects cultural identity, and supports local livelihoods. As a result, sustainability is no longer an optional enhancement; it is a defining feature of responsible destination management.

A sustainable approach rests on three interrelated dimensions: **environmental**, **socio-cultural**, and **economic** responsibility. Together, they provide a framework that aligns tourism promotion with long-term well-being.

1. Environmental Sustainability (Planet)

Environmental concerns sit at the forefront of global tourism conversations. Travelers are now more conscious of carbon emissions, waste generation, water consumption, and biodiversity loss associated with tourism activities. This awareness has pushed destinations to showcase—not merely claim—genuine conservation efforts.

Marketing strategies increasingly highlight initiatives such as:

- carbon-neutral operations and renewable energy use
- plastic-free campaigns and waste-reduction systems
- conservation of wildlife habitats and forest landscapes
- responsible visitor management in fragile environments

The familiar language of “hidden gems,” “untouched places,” or “undiscovered paradises” has become problematic. Without careful management, such promotion can draw unsustainable levels of visitation, ultimately degrading the very landscapes being celebrated. Thus, environmental sustainability requires both responsible operations and responsible storytelling.

2. Socio-Cultural Sustainability (People)

Modern tourists often seek experiences that foster meaningful interaction with local communities. They want to learn about heritage, traditions, cuisine, and ways of life—not merely observe them from a distance. However, these encounters must be grounded in respect and authenticity.

Socio-cultural sustainability emphasizes that tourism:

- should preserve cultural assets rather than dilute or commercialize them
- must support fair wages, dignified work, and local ownership
- should empower communities to participate in decision-making
- needs to provide experiences that reflect lived cultural realities, not stereotypes

When tourism disrupts traditions, strains social relations, or fuels displacement, travelers increasingly notice—and disengage. Destinations that foreground community leadership and cultural integrity, on the other hand, cultivate deeper trust and long-term loyalty.

3. Economic Sustainability (Profit)

Tourism generates revenue, but the crucial question is **who benefits from it**. Economic sustainability stresses that local communities should retain a significant share of tourism income. Marketing strategies can support this by promoting:

- locally owned hotels, homestays, and restaurants
- community-run tours and artisan enterprises
- farm-to-table food systems and local sourcing
- longer stays and higher-value experiences

Reducing economic leakage—where profits flow out to external operators—is essential for strengthening destination self-reliance. Visitors increasingly want assurance that their spending contributes directly to the people who host them.

Sustainability as a Competitive Advantage

Sustainability is not merely a moral obligation; it has become a defining component of destination competitiveness. Travelers are more willing to choose, support, and advocate for destinations that demonstrate environmental care, cultural respect, and fair economic practices.

By centering sustainability, destinations build reputations that endure beyond trends and marketing cycles. They attract a more thoughtful visitor segment, reduce long-term vulnerabilities, and ensure that tourism contributes positively to local and global well-being.

The Success Pillar: Redefining the Metrics

As tourism evolves, the way destinations define and measure success must evolve as well. Traditional metrics – primarily focused on visitor numbers – are no longer sufficient to capture the full impact of tourism on communities, ecosystems, and destination reputation. Simply increasing arrivals does not ensure prosperity, especially when growth strains local resources or diminishes the quality of life for residents.

In the twenty-first century, success is a multi-dimensional concept that reflects **value**, **balance**, and **long-term benefit**. This shift calls for a more holistic set of indicators that reveal not only how many tourists visit, but how they engage with the destination, what they contribute, and how their presence shapes community and environmental well-being.

1. Moving Beyond Volume-Based Measures

The earlier model of “more visitors = more success” has lost relevance. Destinations now recognize that high-volume tourism can lead to overcrowding, environmental degradation, and resident dissatisfaction. Therefore, the focus has shifted to understanding the **quality** of tourism rather than its **quantity**.

Key questions now include:

- Are visitors spending enough to support local businesses?
- Do they stay long enough to develop meaningful connections?
- Are they distributing themselves across seasons and regions instead of concentrating in fragile hotspots?

This approach encourages destinations to attract travelers who engage thoughtfully and leave a positive imprint.

2. Key Performance Indicators for Modern Tourism

A more sophisticated set of KPIs helps capture the broader dimensions of success. These include:

- **Visitor Spend Per Day**
A meaningful measure of economic contribution, especially important when seeking high-value, low-impact travelers.
- **Length of Stay**
Longer visits often translate into deeper cultural engagement, reduced environmental footprint per day, and more equitable distribution of revenue.

- **Geographic and Seasonal Distribution**

Tourism that spreads beyond central attractions and peak seasons reduces pressure on overburdened sites and enables lesser-known communities to benefit.

- **Community Satisfaction**

Residents' perspectives are now crucial. A thriving tourism sector must align with local interests and quality of life. Community support reflects whether tourism is genuinely welcomed.

- **Carbon Footprint Per Visitor**

Environmental responsibility requires assessing how tourism contributes to emissions and identifying ways to reduce or offset them.

- **Brand Reputation and Digital Sentiment**

In an age where opinions spread instantly, a destination's digital footprint is one of its most valuable assets. Positive reviews, trust, and authenticity directly shape future demand.

3. Resilience and Regenerative Impact

Modern tourism success is not only about stability—it is about regeneration. Destinations increasingly aim to leave natural and cultural resources **better** than they were before. This involves initiatives such as:

- restoring ecosystems through visitor-funded conservation
- revitalizing heritage sites and supporting cultural revival
- developing inclusive employment and entrepreneurship opportunities
- strengthening the capacity of local communities to manage tourism independently

A destination that emerges stronger after disruption, adapts to changing conditions, and invests in generational well-being represents the highest form of tourism success.

Success as a Shared, Long-Term Goal

A new understanding of success aligns visitors, businesses, policymakers, and residents toward a common vision. It recognizes that thriving destinations are built not on short-term growth, but on experiences and systems that generate lasting benefits.

By redefining what achievement looks like, the industry can encourage more thoughtful choices, build sustainable markets, and foster deeper connections between people and place.

The Integrated Tourism Marketing (ITM) Matrix

Tourism destinations today operate in environments where strategic priorities, sustainability expectations, and performance outcomes intersect constantly. To help navigate this complexity, the Integrated Tourism Marketing (ITM) Matrix offers a practical tool for aligning marketing choices with broader developmental goals. Rather than treating strategy, sustainability, and success as separate considerations, the matrix encourages decision-makers to evaluate every action through all three lenses simultaneously.

At its core, the ITM Matrix promotes **intentionality**—ensuring that campaigns, partnerships, and visitor programs reinforce both long-term destination health and meaningful traveler engagement.

1. Linking Strategy with Purpose

The strategic dimension of the matrix emphasizes selecting the right audiences, platforms, and narratives for a destination. When planning a new campaign, marketers assess questions such as:

- Who are we trying to reach?
- Why are they a good match for our destination?
- How do we ensure that our messages reflect authenticity and local values?

This approach avoids broad, generic promotion and instead encourages targeted communication that elevates the destination’s strengths without overstating its capacity.

2. Embedding Sustainability in Every Decision

The sustainability lens ensures that marketing initiatives support environmental protection, cultural respect, and local economic participation. For example:

- Campaigns promoting national parks might highlight guided trails that prevent ecological disturbance.
- Hotel rebranding efforts may focus on energy efficiency, responsible sourcing, and staff development.
- Digital ads may encourage travelers to visit less-congested areas to reduce pressure on vulnerable sites.

Marketing becomes a tool not only for attracting visitors but for shaping responsible visitor behavior.

3. Measuring Success through Meaningful Indicators

The success lens encourages destinations to look beyond short-term visitor increases. Instead, they evaluate:

- improved visitor satisfaction
- increased use of local services
- reduced waste or resource pressure
- enhanced resident support for tourism
- strengthened brand reputation

By monitoring these metrics, destinations ensure that marketing contributes to long-term resilience rather than momentary spikes in demand.

4. How the ITM Matrix Works in Practice

Here are simplified examples demonstrating how a single action is assessed through the three pillars:

Launching a national park campaign

- *Strategic:* Target slow-travel and nature-oriented visitors.
- *Sustainability:* Promote safe trails, responsible waste disposal, and local nature guides.
- *Success:* Track increased use of guided tours and decreased litter across peak seasons.

Rebranding a hotel chain

- *Strategic:* Position properties as welcoming spaces for combined business and leisure travel.
- *Sustainability:* Emphasize green building certification and locally sourced dining options.
- *Success:* Measure corporate bookings, guest reviews on sustainability, and staff retention.

Managing overtourism in a heritage city

- *Strategic:* Use data-driven digital ads to highlight alternative neighborhoods and attractions.
- *Sustainability:* Implement and promote visitor caps during peak hours.
- *Success:* Track reduced congestion in core areas and improved resident satisfaction.

Through such examples, the ITM Matrix demonstrates its value as both a planning tool and a monitoring framework—helping destinations make balanced, evidence-based decisions.

Case in Point: The Rise and Responsibility of Over Tourism

Overtourism has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges in contemporary tourism. Cities such as Venice, Barcelona, and Amsterdam—once celebrated for their thriving visitor economies—now serve as cautionary examples of what happens when popularity overwhelms capacity.

For many destinations, successful marketing in the late twentieth century created global visibility and demand. Yet the very triumph of those efforts led to overcrowded streets, declining resident satisfaction, and environmental stress. Visitors, too, began to feel the consequences: longer queues, diminished authenticity, and rising costs.

The response is not to halt promotion altogether, but to rethink its purpose.

1. Using Marketing to Manage, Not Just Attract

Modern marketing helps guide tourists toward **better choices** by:

- encouraging visits during quieter seasons
- spotlighting lesser-known attractions that can accommodate growth
- promoting traveler etiquette and respectful cultural behavior
- inspiring environmentally conscious decisions

This approach reframes promotion as a management tool, helping disperse demand and support more sustainable visitor flows.

2. Balancing Visitor Interest and Resident Well-Being

A destination cannot thrive if its residents feel displaced or unheard. Efforts to manage overtourism now involve:

- community consultations
- limits on short-term rentals
- zoning for tourism activities
- protection of local traditions and public spaces

Marketing can reinforce these policies by communicating expectations clearly and highlighting initiatives that protect heritage and daily life.

3. Building a Long-Term Vision

The shift toward responsible tourism acknowledges that visitor experience and resident well-being are interconnected. By positioning themselves as places that value balance, destinations cultivate a more respectful traveler base and protect the integrity of their cultural and environmental assets.

Conclusion: The Way Forward

Tourism in the twenty-first century stands at a crossroads. The practices that once sustained the industry are no longer adequate for a world shaped by digital transformation, climate instability, and evolving traveler expectations. The future belongs to destinations that understand this shift and embrace a model where **strategy, sustainability, and success support one another** rather than compete for attention.

Effective marketing today requires more than persuasive visuals. It demands thoughtful storytelling, responsible visitor management, and a commitment to ensuring that tourism enriches both the places visited and the people who call those places home. Sustainability must guide every decision—shaping the way destinations promote themselves, manage resources, and measure achievement. Success, in turn, must reflect more than economic growth. It must consider community well-being, environmental care, cultural preservation, and the long-term resilience of the industry.

This chapter lays the foundation for a new way of thinking about tourism marketing—one that sees the visitor experience not as a standalone product, but as part of a broader ecosystem of relationships, responsibilities, and shared benefits. The chapters that follow will equip readers with tools, insights, and real-world strategies to navigate this evolving landscape and to build a future where tourism continues to inspire, connect, and sustain.

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