

## Visitor Relationship Marketing: A Case Study in Samosir Tourism Area

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### Abstract

*Visitor Relationship Marketing (VRM) is a critical idea and concept for enhancing marketing communications in order for a company to gain a competitive edge. The study shows correlations between the literature and related theories with the case study's conclusions. According to this qualitative study, COVID-19 instances influenced the VRM approach for hotels in the Samosir area. These issues are related to the Coordinating Ministry for Maritime Affairs and Investment regulations, which have established health standards for natural tourism sites in Indonesia. These measures and regulations are anticipated to increase local tourist visits to the new normal period while avoiding COVID-19 transmission. Health procedures will be implemented at nature-based tourism sites with a strong emphasis on the concepts of cleanliness, health, and safety (CHS). These principles are being implemented in order to boost visitor trust in Indonesia's post-Covid-19 tourism sector. Tourist sites, particularly those in the Samosir area, urgently need trustworthy communication actors, particularly stakeholders who might persuade and ensure that the tourist industry can be depended upon to enhance people's welfare and the national economy. Therefore, tourist sites should be adequately managed, beginning with site preparation and marketing initiatives to attract visitors. In order to promote this tourist destination, relationship marketing as an embodiment of marketing communication is required. VRM, based on the CHS principles, can help tourists establish trust and commitment, select appropriate media, minimise barriers, and actively work to ground the Toba Caldera Geopark tourism sites, which UNESCO has already designated as Global Geopark destinations. In practice, it is anticipated that the local government, as the driving force behind Geopark tourist destinations, will promote further tourism-related activities. Several of them, for instance, conducted training on CHS principles, recruited members who were relationship marketing experts, collaborated with the health department, developed trust with multiple parties to stimulate positive information, and established sponsorships to develop hospitality and tourism for Geopark tourist destinations.*

### Keywords

VRM; destination; CHS principles; geopark; Samosir; North Sumatera



## I. Introduction

Public relations is critical for any business since it helps shape the image of businesses, products, and tourist destinations by informing the public about the company's commercial advancements or managing tourist destinations. According to Kotler & Keller (2009), relationship marketing concentrates on two-way communication in order to develop and sustain connections and interactions between actors (businesses) and other actors (visitors). Therefore, VRM offers several indicators for detecting and resolving issues linked to contemporary tourist trends.

Samosir is a famous tourist site that could draw tourists to the area. The location is one of the most popular tourist attractions in North Sumatera Province, which has tremendous potential for adventure than other Indonesian tourist sites. Tourism in the Samosir area is well-known among Indonesians and even international visitors. Along with many exciting tourist attractions, such as nature tourism, geoparks, and agrotourism, these tourist areas are also well-known for art and cultural tourism and historical heritage tourism. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 epidemic, which affected virtually every area, led to a decrease in international and domestic visitor arrivals at many tourism sites, including the Samosir tourism area. Therefore, it is essential to create tourist destinations that rely on the capabilities of marketing communication actors to convey to the public the health procedures and protocols to anticipate the Covid-19 virus spreading in the Samosir tourism area. Hence, the actors involved must respond quickly, beginning with the willingness of stakeholders in tourism destinations to adhere to the safety and security requirements themselves.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected hospitality and tourism operations in Samosir, such as a decrease in weekend hotel guests and rates, which has resulted in the stagnation of business operations for many hotels in the Samosir area. This scenario exists as a result of visitors' concern and caution regarding the possibility of COVID-19 infection. Hence, to expedite the tourism industry's recovery, the government invested IDR 3.8 trillion in a national economic stimulus fund for the tourism sector to promote excellent destinations. In addition, domestic travel is also promoted by the government via the City Activation, Staycation, Roadtrip, and Epic Sale tourism initiatives. This objective is to boost the state's income from domestic tourists, which accounts for between 55% and 70% of the total revenue.

Based on data from The Indonesian COVID-19 Handling Task Force stated that until March 13, 2021, the total number of Covid-19 cases in Indonesia was 1,140,134 people, who recovered as many as 1,231,497 people, and died as many as 38,229 people (Covid-19 Handling Task Force, 2021). The number of people infected with the corona virus in North Sumatera Province in the same period, has reached 25,913. Furthermore, 873 people died from Covid-19, and 2,509 were still sick (actively positive), and 22,531 people were declared cured.(Andrafarm in Pohan, I et al. 2021)

In other related situations, the marine tourism industry has also been impacted by the COVID-19 epidemic. According to a study reported by the Indonesian Diving Business Association, 66.2 per cent of players in this sector ceased operations during the epidemic. Meanwhile, 93% of respondents indicated that they had no income. As a result, Covid-19 caused losses of IDR 75.8 billion and impacted up to 1,784 employees in the maritime tourism industry. Additionally, the study reported that 44% of employees were accommodated without dependent families, 26% with dependent families and 4.5 per cent were laid off.

Regardless of the pandemic, the term "relationship marketing" refers to the activities undertaken to create, maintain, enhance, and commercialise customer connections in order to achieve the objectives of all parties involved in those relationships (Gronroos, 2004; 2011). In this instance, hotel public relations should be able to convince and communicate effectively with their guests with regard to tourism health protocol requirements.

The Coordinating Ministry for Maritime Affairs and Investment has prepared a health protocol for nature-based tourist destinations in Indonesia. It is also mentioned that these efforts are expected to boost local tourist visits in the new norms period while preventing coronavirus transmission. The application of health protocols in nature-based tourist destinations will prioritise the principles of cleanliness, health, and safety (CHS). These CHS were put in place to boost visitors' trust in post-Covid-19 Indonesian tourism destinations and

the industry. Natural tourist destinations have a lower risk of transmission than urban tourist destinations, which usually invite crowds. However, these minimal risks of transmission should not be underestimated. Therefore, each stakeholder must ensure the implementation of health protocols in nature-based tourist destinations which are equipped with supporting facilities. Although the facilities do not support it and the promotion is everywhere, in turn, people will not believe it. The key is cleanliness, health, safety, and the tourism industry must build visitors' trust in travel.

## **II. Review of Literature**

### **2.1 Marketing Communication**

Communication characteristics are activities that convey what is on the mind, have a concept, and convey a desire to others, or, in other words, the art of influencing others to get their wishes (Pearson & Nelson, 2000). It is also mentioned that marketing communication is a marketing activity that seeks to disseminate information, influence or persuade, and remind the company's target audience and its products to be willing to accept, buy, or be loyal to the products offered by the company concerned (Tjiptono, 2007). Each marketing category has its own set of tools, such as advertising characterised by written, broadcast or outdoor media (Kotler & Keller, 2009). In other words, it indicates that marketing communication is closely related to the principle of relationship marketing, in which one of the marketing communication tools uses the principle.

### **2.2 Communication Strategy**

Basically, strategy is related to various stages of optimal response to new challenges faced by the company, either due to previous steps or due to external pressure. A strategy includes strategic planning, which is a continuous process (Sutaryo, 2005). Specific planning contains tricks or ways to achieve the expected goals. It is characterised by choosing how to use communication to build commonalities between individuals in an organisation for a communication strategy. In this study, interpersonal communication is used by proposing a relationship escalation model referred to by Siagian (2010) and developed by Knapp (Relationship Escalation). The communication strategies that must be considered to achieve a company's success, called the four R's (Rangkuti, 2006), are as follows. (a) Building customer relationships - creating company relationships with customers over time. (b) Creating customer retention - retaining existing customers. This case will be much more expensive than finding new customers. (c) Generating customer referrals - When customers are satisfied, they will return and even bring their family or friends. (d) Gaining customer recovery on how companies fix and turn mistakes into opportunities.

### **2.3 Visitor Relations**

A customer relationship is defined as an individual or a group of individuals who use one or more of the products or services provided (Khasali, 2005). In this regard, the strategy of a business process that aims to build and maintain relationships between companies and visitors is identical to the concept of Visitor Relationship Management (VRM). VRM is related to an information technology industry term for methodologies, strategies, software, and other web-based applications that may help companies manage visitor relationships. VRM is related to the company's efforts to focus on keeping visitors (visitors-centric) by using all touchpoints, such as interaction channels with customers, either by telephone, email, website, or discussions with sales and marketing staff (Arofata, 2011).

Meanwhile, customer relations deals with work related to visitors. Therefore, companies should improve communication with their customers and express their concern for customers. For this reason, one of the fundamental characteristics of a good working relationship is two-way communication (Umar, 2005).

VRM is used in practice to (a) identify factors that are important to visitors; (b) adopt a visitors-oriented (visitors-centric) philosophy; (c) adopt measurements based on the visitor's point of view; (d) establish end-to-end processes to serve visitors; (e) provide impeccable visitor support; (f) handle visitor complaints; (g) record and follow all aspects of sales; and (h) create holistic information.

Given that visitors relation is one of the jobs that involve company actors interacting with visitors, the critical task of visitor relations is to provide services to the company's visitors. Lovelock and Wright (2005) noted that relationship marketing consists of trust, commitment, communication, and conflict handling. Trust is considered a fundamental element in the success of relationship marketing. Without trust, a relationship is unlikely to last in the long term. Commitment is marked by a belief between related parties who want a continuous relationship and is considered essential to maintaining a relationship. Communication is the most important way for actors to form relationships with other actors. Communication has a vital role in building relationships, and it will establish the relationship between the company and its visitors. Conflict handling can become a severe problem within the company and may potentially reduce performance when conflict is a particular action during interactions with visitors.

### **III. Research Methods**

This research approach uses qualitative techniques to generate a comprehensive and in-depth picture based on the natural situation of the case under study. The research method that the authors use is a single case study, which highlights individuals/groups of individuals' behaviour with significant problems, and the researchers are the instrument of the research. Yin (2000; 2003) states that a qualitative approach with a single case study requires humans as the instrument. The data that the authors collected started by examining all the available data from various sources, interviews, observations recorded in field notes, personal documents, official documents, and photos. Then we studied and made data redactions by making abstractions. The next step is to arrange them into units and then group them according to the research problem.

### **IV. Results and Discussion**

Currently, almost all tourist destinations are affected by Covid-19 and are experiencing an economic downturn. Because of this, highlighting the problem has become an important aspect that should be studied. The importance of providing tourist products; the need for a dependable and targeted marketing strategy. Relationship marketing, which is also relevant to discussions about service marketing, can take various strategic steps to promote tourism in underdeveloped areas, given the high level of involvement and interaction between visitors and service providers in most service businesses.

This research was conducted using a descriptive case study approach aimed at knowing how to describe relationship marketing with Cleanliness, Health, and Safety (CHS) principles to develop tourism destinations according to their objectives. This study does not prove any particular theory. The Cleanliness, Health, and Safety (CHS) SOP aim to guide tourism industry actors in managing activities to survive normally amid the Covid-19 pandemic that

has not subsided. The recovery stages of the new norms focus of the tourism sector include the creation of added value, orchestration of the tourism sector, carrying capacity and sustainable tourism, governance and destination management systems, and development of upskilling, reskilling, and multiskilling to improve service quality according to health protocols & safety in a series of business chains. Certification for properties/infrastructure/logistics, activities and services, marketing and promotion of Indonesia as a safe and healthy destination, digital tourism, development of unique, exciting products for domestic tourists, diaspora, eco-friendly, voluntourism and MICE, partnerships, value chains and ecosystem tourism, resilience and disaster mitigation.

#### **4.1. Applying the CHS Concept**

The cleanliness concept applied is discipline and stakeholder commitment (such as government/industries/communities/visitors), adequate cleaning facilities & disinfecting, clean & healthy toilets, and routine cleaning staff. The health concepts implemented include the availability of clinics (health facilities) & tic, valid health certificate, thermal scanner & monitoring body temperature of visitors, hand washing facilities, free masks, freehand sanitiser, routine disinfection. Sanitation and hygiene, for example, should be prioritised under the new healthy protocol. Screening of employees who will work, especially those who come from the red zone area. Screening of travellers using technology at check-in. Contactless payments, more frequent cleaning of public areas, including toilets. Put the label 'Sanitized, highly clean, Covid-friendly' on tourist equipment and facilities. Other protocols follow their respective services to provide a sense of security and comfort for the visitors.

Meanwhile, hotels may implement several protocols to make visitors feel safe, including (1) hygiene & sanitation - public area cleanliness, room cleanliness, and the cleanliness of existing facilities. (2) adopt technology-tourist screening; unlock rooms with apps; (3) maintain social distance-arrange the lift or use of the stairs; set the distance to the lounge chair, fitness room. (4) healthy lifestyle program-medical facilities; sports events; healthy food and beverage menu.

The Samosir Geopark tourism destination carries out relationship marketing activities in three ways: visitors' care, loyalty programs, and community building.

- Visitors are cared for by providing friendly and courteous services to visitors while adhering to the principles of cleanliness, health, and safety (CHS). For example, visitors will be asked to wash their hands with soap and water, and then a tissue will be provided to dry their hands and then spray them with a hand sanitiser. Checking the body's temperature and wearing a mask are both required in this instance.
- The loyalty program - is accomplished by offering a discounted tour package to visitors returning to visit, and strategies to generate interest in visiting continue.
- Community development organisations can create a website that visitors can access at any time to learn more about Samosir tourism.

Relationship marketing adheres to cleanliness, health, and safety (CHS) principles to develop tourist destinations as needed and supports the tourist destination's foundation. Given that the Samosir Geopark tourist destination still requires marketable marketing injections, stakeholders, as the driving force behind the Samosir Geopark, should do even more to support tourism continuity and the importance of targeted and informative marketing communications to ensure the survival of tourism destinations in North Sumatera. The Samosir tourism industry players are attempting to build tourist trust in various ways, including social media, the travelling community, and universities, which will impact the post-covid-19 situation.

Various other efforts are also being made to build visitor trust in the new average period, such as establishing appropriate, routine, and good communication between stakeholders and visitors. This instance can be employed by prioritising health protocols, listening and receiving suggestions or criticism from visitors, or providing information regarding the Samosir Geopark. Professional guides will not discriminate against tourists who visit and will always provide good service and assist tourists by explaining the destinations to be visited. Furthermore, visitors are recorded in order to maintain long-term relationships between the Samosir tourism industry and visitors. Although the impact of tourism is not limited to visiting tourist destinations, there are unique experiences when visitors are involved in the daily activities of people's lives. Nevertheless, it is also critical to empower communities in the Samosir area by introducing valuable commodities such as fruits, fish, vegetables, crafts, and unique Samosir souvenirs. Perhaps, it may raise visitors' confidence in the diversity of other potential sources of Samosir.

## V. Conclusion

We suggested various efforts to improve the sustainability of the Samosir tourism industry in the post-COVID-19 pandemic, particularly for the hospitality tourism industry. This case is a commitment given to visitors through a relationship marketing program. In other words, it is not just a promise but actually done. It is recommended to receive suggestions and criticisms from visitors for the development of Samosir Tourism. Suggestions and criticisms from visitors are evidence that visitors care about the advancement of Samosir tourism. It is advised to offer the best service and discounts. It is recommended to cooperate with various domestic and foreign tourism operators. It is recommended to help maintain the health of visitors with CHS health protocols and convey important information. It is recommended to prepare CHS facilities and infrastructure, such as hotels, homestays, vehicles, guides, culinary and handicraft production houses.

Commitment will emerge as the fruit of trust, shared values, and the belief that the current stakeholders are very valuable and their position is truly irreplaceable. Commitment will motivate both parties to cooperate and preserve visitor relationship-based tourism. Commitment also means that partners will set aside short-term alternatives to achieve more stable long-term benefits that they will realise with their current loyal partners. The communication media used to develop the Samosir tourist destination aim at information and promotion media to market the Geopark and relationship building with visitors, particularly as a means of information and suggestions for a better emotional bond.

The communication media have chosen to establish relationships with visitors and to introduce other favourite tourist destinations in Samosir, for example, through bloggers, vloggers, celebrities, and Youtubers. Additionally, the involvement of social media volunteers can help communicate the current situation of the Samosir tourism industry. Given that understanding tourist expectations is complex, it is necessary to identify factors that might increase the trust and commitment of visitors. Therefore, the authors suggest that further researchers may identify the factors that determine the trust and commitment of visitors, especially post-Covid-19 in Samosir.

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