The Future of Tourist Information Centers in Flanders

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Destinet.de · C/O Matthias Burzinski · Beringstraße 33 · 53115 Bonn

Mobil +49 (0)178-5060079 · Fon +49 (0)228 85099164

www. destinet.de – www.serviceti.destinet.de

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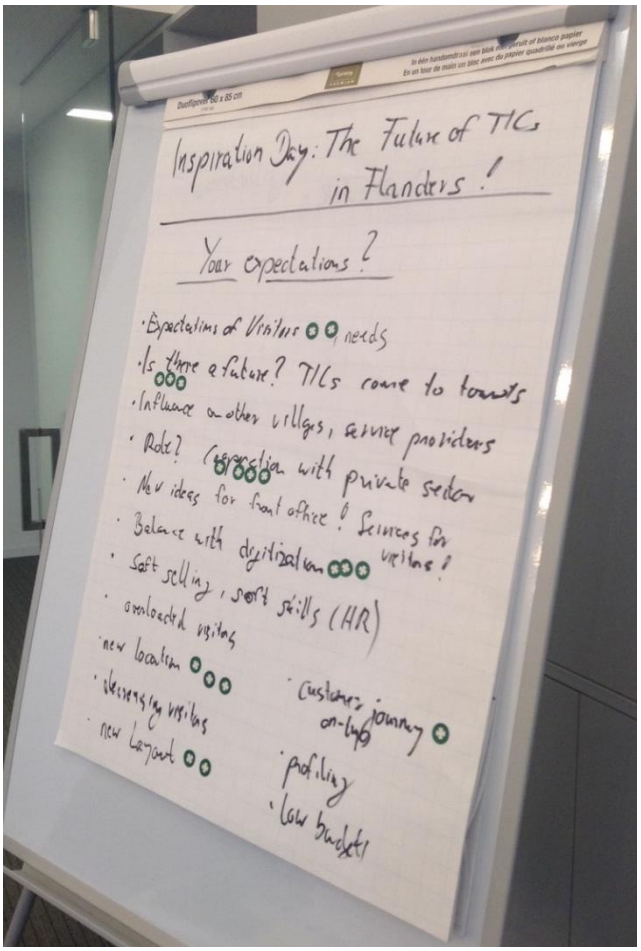
Expectations and topics



The expectations of the participants reflected a wide range of problems and questions, which are connected with the Tourist Information Centers (TICs) and its future.

This was already demonstrated by the comments at the beginning of the workshop. Nevertheless, the existing problems can be roughly divided into three areas:

1. General uncertainties about the future of the TICs
    A. Future expectations of the guests at TICs
    B. New services and offers for guests
    C. Importance of digitization
    D. The role of TICs within the Customer Journey
    E. New skills for staff and employees
2. Specific, local problems and challenges
    A. Relocation
    B. A new room layout for the TIC
    C. The importance of the TIC for the profiling of the destination
    D. Shrinking budgets
3. Problems of cooperation and networking
    A. Cooperation with other TICs within the region

B. Cooperation with the service providers on site

Significant differences were found, depending on the size of the cities and TICs as well as the strength of the destination brand. Networking problems are apparently more important among smaller TICs within subregions of Flanders, while in the larger cities, which function more strongly as their own destination brands, specific local problems and fundamental questions about the future of the TICs dominate. During the lectures, the following main topics were discussed:

- **The influence of digitization on the tourism industry in general and especially the TICs**: Digital devices have become the constant companion of the guests. What does that mean for the provision of information by TICs? The participants agreed that digitization is one driver of the development, but not all of the TICs have enough resources to react on that challenge.

- **Customer needs, wishes, desires and satisfaction**: The participants agreed that we have overstrained and overloaded guests. The personal advice is therefore not completely substituted by digital information devices, but there is a need to find the right balance between the informational self-service and the need for informational coaching. They have to identify the right "micro-moment" or target situation for each communication channel.
  And TICs have another problem with the guests needs: They have to provide more and more new tasks and services, but can rarely switch off old ones. Because the danger is: Guaranteed then comes a guest and asks exactly this service and instantly tells everybody, that the staff was not able to help him ("dissatisfier").

- **Human resources:** This also demands news skills of the staff within the TICs. In addition to their current qualifications concerning services and the personal consultation to the guests, the staff also has to deal with the new, deeper informational needs, skills for the operation of digital devices and sales psychology.

- **Atmosphere:** To take care for the customer also means to create an atmosphere within the rooms of the TICs that matches with the needs and desires of the tourists. The example of St. Moritz Dorf showed that very representatively. The disconnecting effect of the counter is canceled in St. Moritz and signals something to the guests: "You are a part of us, you are welcome and we welcome you on the same level." This contains a new service

concept including the new demands on employees and it is combined with digital instruments – not only used by the guests but also by the employees within the personal consultation. Last but not least it conveys values - the values of the destinations brand.

- **Stakeholder:** Especially in smaller TICs it is sometimes difficult to communicate and cooperate with the local and regional service providers and entrepreneurs as they focus on other priorities. TICs have to make clear that they offer several complementary services (accommodation, gastronomy, attractions, cultural institutions etc.) and increase the turnover of these entrepreneurs and providers. On the other hand they should focus on the needs of the guests. This means, that not every service provider is recommended and marketed, but only those that have defined quality requirements. What seems to be clear is sometimes politically unenforceable. The TICs are looking for new ways to resolve this problems.

- **Branding:** The customer has decided for a certain reason to travel into the destination. This must be confirmed - especially in the TIC. This means: The brand and the profile of the destination has to be presented within the interior design and the services of a TIC. This is a challenge that is made even more difficult by the new digital channels and devices. It is more complicated to ensure the consistency of the brand communication. Therefore the brand has to be more emotional and appealing, for example by telling stories. In addition there is a need to find the right balance between a local and regional brand.

- **Shrinking budgets:** The participants emphasized the interest in small interventions and measures which do not require a comprehensive new concept. For this, we recommend a look at the presentation, the case examples and ideas contained in it.

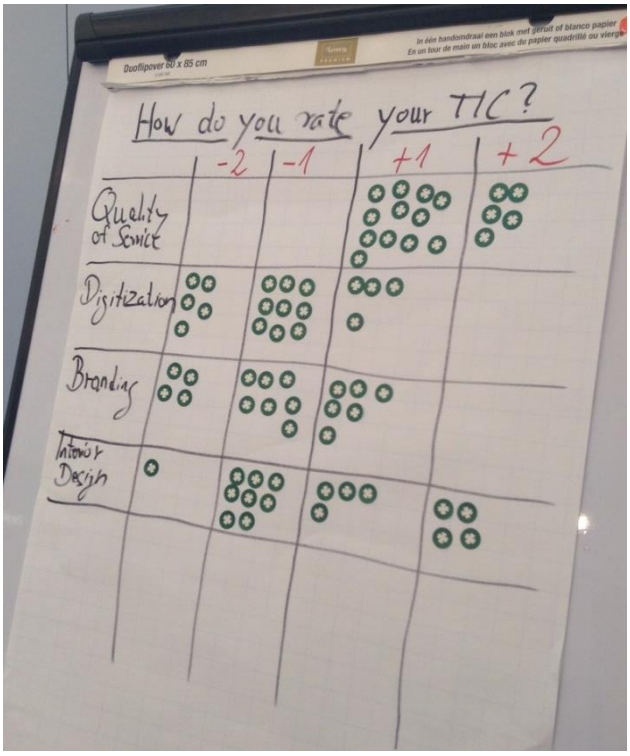
With these fundamental discussions and topics, participants began the second phase of the workshop in the afternoon, which was mainly characterized by group work.

The main fields of action

Identifying the fields of action

At the beginning of the group work session, a short rating of the state of the TICs was carried out. For this purpose the participants evaluated four main characteristics of their own TICs, the

- Quality of service
- Digitization
- Branding
- Interior design.



The results showed that the quality of service is not a pressing problem. Instead, the issue of **cooperation and networking** was added as a fourth, very important field of action.

Accordingly, the participants worked in four groups in which strengths and weaknesses as well as solutions and ideas for the four areas of action were developed. The following is a summary of these results.

Cooperation and networking

The following strengths and weaknesses were identified:

+	-
• Brand consistency and storytelling • A consisting visitor journey • shared responsibilities (both strength and weakness)	• shared responsibilities (both strength and weakness) • a difficult distribution of local and regional content • a wide range of different entrepreneurs and their priorities • a sometimes bad information flow within organisations

The group showed that there are target conflicts between the local service providers and the TICs, which hinder exchange. The need for communication among each other is weighted differently. As a result, information, as well as the content for the tourist marketing, often flow poorly. This can increase the effect that guests are often informed incorrectly or inaccurate.

The goal must therefore be to ensure brand consistency, to promote the exchange of information and to make positive use of the shared responsibility. Ambassadors have to mediate between the TICs and providers to promote co-operation and innovation, through new management skills, content management systems and overall more networking.

Some solutions and advices of the group are:

- To develop an ambassador scheme with different levels of networking
- to share knowledge, trends and needs of the peer groups by networking

- personal coaching of providers an entrepreneurs, for example concerning topics like local storytelling, marketing and communication, tailored product management
- to develop a new system for the distribution of content ("perfect CMS")
- to define the new role of a "translator" or mediator, who speaks the language of both sides,
- using social media for networking, for example a special facebook group like it is established in Oostende.

Additional hints from destinet.de

In our opinion, quality is the key to promoting co-operation. As soon as performance providers notice that they are no longer recommended, the willingness to cooperate and network increases. What to do:

- Be an example and start your own quality offensive.
- Initiate internal, local and regional service and product networks. From these, you generate the products, offers and experiences for the guests. Motivate this network to meet defined quality criteria.
- Cultivate this network with annual meetings, thematic events, or through a facebook group and inform it regularly about guest claims as well as quality criteria.
- Create a (digital) database that only accepts providers that meet certain quality criteria. This is the base for the content management system and needs an interface to the communication channels.
- Convince providers of sector-specific classifications and certifications.
- Find some politics, multiplicators and leading service providers, who support your strategy and promote it in public discussions.

Digitization

The following strengths and weaknesses were identified:

+	-
• Targeted advertising • User generated content (posts by fans) • Great development potential • …	• Lack of experts • Too many providers with digital solutions – unclear market situation • high costs and little resources and budgets • Some solutions are quickly outdated • Everyday business prevents the search for new digital solutions – lack of time

The group made it clear that lack of resources - little money, time and expertise - lead to the fact that the digitization is not properly processed. On the other hand, the great potential is seen that results from the digitization, e.g. the targeted marketing, the user-generated content, the networking-effect, etc.

The goal must therefore be to create a uniformed system and a data platform from which all channels can be operated. This must correspond to the branding of the destinations. In addition, the employees have to learn how to deal with the new digital media.

The role of Visit Flanders was also questioned, e.g. whether the DMO can take over some tasks of digitization to support the local TICs.

Some solutions and advices of the group are:

- To uniformize the data consistent with the brand
- To retain flexibility in order to be able to depict special features
- To review new possibilities, e.g. i-beacons

- Training of employees
- To define the website as a content basis for all measures.

Additional hints from destinet.de

Digitization, the mobile Internet, customer-specific data and the targeted channeling of information enable the marketing and service to be personalized. The goal is to use this to guarantee the best possible service to the guests. Time and resource shortages cannot be the reason for neglecting digitization. It is indispensable and a must! Therefore, tasks and resources in the TICs must be rebalanced. Ask yourself: Which tasks are the most important for the future? Whoch can be diminished?

In view of the diversity and abundance of digital communication and information instruments, there is actually often a lack of time to examine appropriate channels. Digitization is therefore an area in which the division of work and tasks is very important in order not to create any inconsistencies between the local TICs, the DMO (Visit Flanders) or the information generated by external channels (such as Google). Try to organize this division of work and tasks with a new organizational structure for digitization.

Develop a communication concept that integrates digital and analogous aspects and fits into the company concept and strategy of the TIC. Use the digital communication, sales and booking channels, which are set as standards at the DMO-level. This increases the recognition as well as compliance with standards and reduces the costs for own solutions. The DMO is called upon to develop and provide appropriate standards. These include, for example:

- content management systems,
- existing website frameworks,
- booking systems,
- profiles in social media,
- messaging services to communicate directly with the guest,
- evaluation platforms,
- standards for search engine optimization,

- apps with push message function.

From a central database with interfaces to the local solutions all analog and digital communication instruments can be served, e.g.

- the own website,
- local / regional information terminals,
- notebooks, PCs and tablets, which are used in on-site consultation in the TIC,
- starting pages when dialing into the free Wifi,
- digital services of the service providers, eg digital guest maps in hotels, TV sets in the rooms,
- local offshoots of regional apps,
- host lists, print brochures and flyers.

Animate your service providers to prepare their own information, offers and products in such a way that they can also be integrated into this centralized data storage. Or encourage the use of the same systems. Always look for interfaces and licensing models to integrate the providers into your own digital communication, information and booking processes. This allows both the guest a better access to all offers as well as new sales opportunities to the service providers.

Ensure that employees in the tourist information are adequately qualified and / or trained to apply the various tools. Define some guidelines: "How and what to communicate ..."

Train your employees in using new digital communication and service channels. You should also educate your employees in the use and special features of the common digital devices (smartphones, tablets with different operating systems, etc.).

Contact to the provider of the system presented during the workshop (please refer to Matthias Burzinski/destinet.de):

Stefan Huber
hubermedia GmbH
Gaberlplatz 5
D-93462 Lam

Phone: (+49) 09943 9052 25
Telefax: (+49) 09943 9052 24
stefan.huber@hubermedia.de
http://www.hubermedia.de

Branding

The following strengths and weaknesses were identified[1]:

+	-
• Visuals • Exchange between the staff • Involvement of stakeholders and staff	• Existence of a corporate identity • Clearly defined relationship between local and regional branding • Lack of consistency, especially concerning the look & feel • Unclear role and "branding-value" of the "i"

The group mainly focused on the basics of branding. It should be borne in mind that the situation in the individual TICs is very different. One of the main tasks is always to define the relationship between the local (urban) brand and the regional brand. For this purpose, it is first necessary to determine whether the status of a destination brand can be achieved at all. If not, it is necessary to focus on activities and experiences.

The group emphasized the role of employees and stakeholders in the branding process, thereby making it clear that branding is more than just a visualization. Ultimately it is about values and characteristics, which must also be reflected in the behaviour, offerings and the atmosphere in the TICs.

Some solutions and advices of the group are:

- Interaction between regional TICs
- Participation in the branding process
- To ensure the consistency and recognition of the brand

[1] It was sometimes not clearly to identify, if the term was ranked as strength or weakness.

- To create events for ambassadors and staff in order to enforce cooperation, communication and networking

Additional hints from destinet.de

The aim is to consistently apply the brand and its values, content and emotions to the locally operating TIC. What brand values do we represent? What profound issues do we need to highlight? What stories do we tell on the spot? How do we convince and inspire our guests?

Determine what your destination is, what makes it different from others. Define the experiential area ("Erlebnisraum") for which the TIC is responsible. The guests' perception and the its radius of action should be the benchmark. This results in a mental map in the minds of the guests. Define which (sub) products are relevant and can be marketed for you. Define your quality standards and define rules for their use.

The consistent creation and conveying of a mental map is a very effective way to build a brand in the long term. And it is a simple way, which corresponds strongly with the needs of the guests for orientation and experiences. Use this very simple way of branding (details can be found in the presentation).

Another key process is storytelling – by staging and theming. In this way, guests get an emotional access to concrete services. Storytelling can be viewed and implemented from two perspectives.

- From the perspective of the destination: What stories do we tell the guest? This can be based on the local history, the natural and cultural landscape, individual providers or also local personalities.

- From the perspective of the guest: How do we make the guest part of a story? In this case, we understand the entire stay of the guest as his personal story, which he tells his friends, relatives and acquaintances at home, but still during the stay. Animate him to share his stories and experiences, eg by implementing a facebook or Instagram competition.

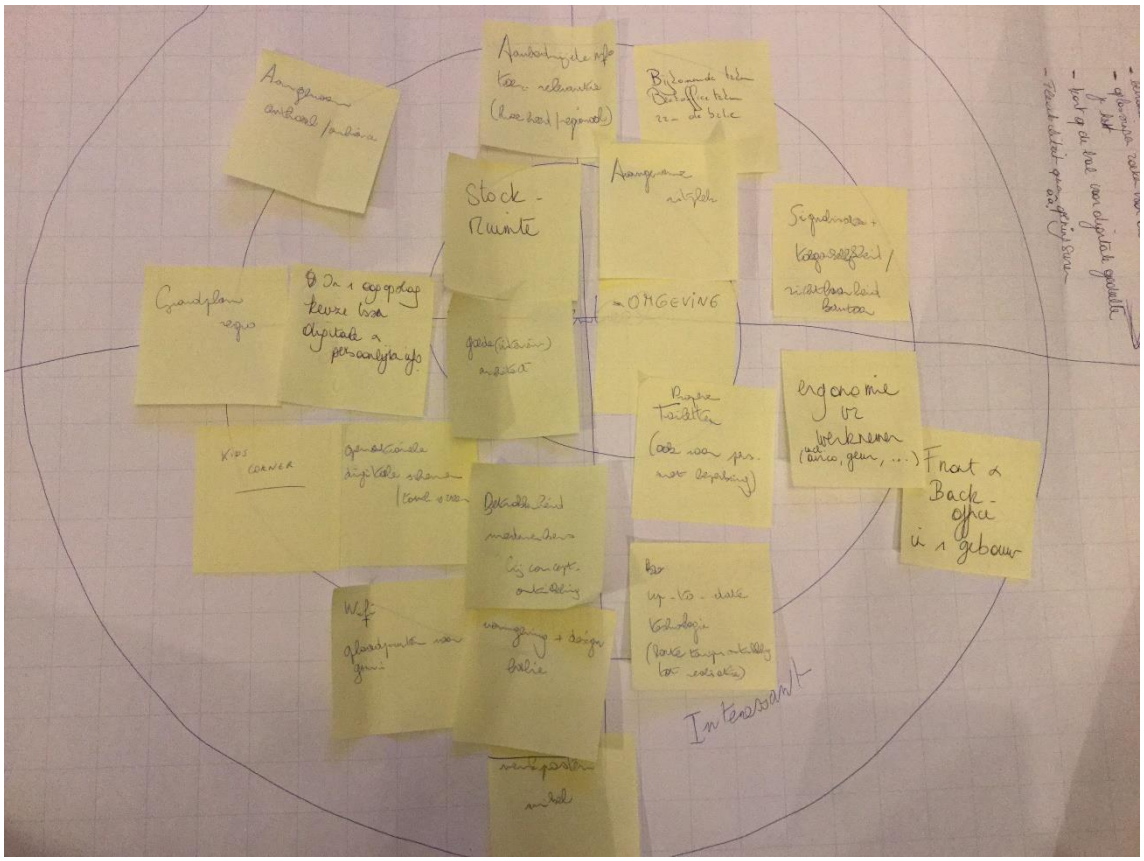
Storytelling is the base for a direct communication with the guest. This is the main strength of the TICs within the branding process. Make use of the guest data collected through personal contacts and for which you have a usage permit, for direct marketing and referral marketing.

Use these valuable data for a lasting customer contact in sense of developing a brand personality, e.g. by

- regular seasonal newsletters,
- weather-dependent email marketing,
- direct and push messages (if possible and permissible),
- (print) mailing with special offers / brochures,
- birthday greetings and offers,
- regular customer offers and discounts.
- ensure that you comply with data protection regulations.

Interior design

From the beginning, the group did not differentiate between strengths, weaknesses and individual measures and ideas. Therefore, the results of the group work are inserted as a photo.



It is obvious that the group tried to reconcile the requirements of design, ergonomics, technical equipment and room layout. The goal was to take into account not only the demands of the guests, but also those of the employees.

Important aspects for the guests may be

- a pleasant atmosphere,
- guidelines for design,
- a choice between personal advice or self-service,
- special areas, e.g. a kids corner,
- a good signposting,

- etc.

However, the group also paid a lot of attention to

- storage rooms,
- the optimal connection of frontoffice and backoffice,
- a participation of the employees from the beginning,
- a modern technical equipment,
- etc.

The group also recommended an overall masterplan for a whole region or destination as by this it may be easier to define recurring elements or to save costs.

Additional hints from destinet.de

An effective layout planning of the room is based on two elements, which are connected to each other:

- **Functional islands:** These are the central areas in which the guest receives his desired or required services. The most important function island is the counter. In modern service concepts, the central counter is dissolved in favor of decentralized consulting islands (see example St. Moritz Dorf). However, this usually only works in TICs that do not have six-digit visitor numbers. Further functional islands are: comfort zones, shelves for brochures, information terminals and screens, children's play area, large area maps / plans, shop zones, checkout areas, event rooms, toilets, offices, etc.
- **Topical islands:** They are designed to arouse a hidden need and inspire guests emotionally. This is why topic islands are geared to product lines and brand values. The topic island can be highly varied and adopt individual forms and formats ranging from a large-scale photo, interactive experience stations to artistic installations, etc. The creative, individual approach should fit into the local and regional profile and express its individual attitudes.

Layout planning is supplemented by details of spatial design, presentation and sales psychology (see presentation for more details), e.g.

- an individual design that reflects the local and regional identity as well as the brand values of your destination,
- a so-called multisensual design, which appeals to all the senses - seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting,
- a spatially adapted light concept,
- clearly thematically arranged and labeled shelf divisions,
- the promotion of sales items, open, to "touch" (not in the showcase) to enable a sensory experience,
- the presentation of articles in the form of the topic islands (e.g. old craftsmanship of the region, culinary journey through the region),
- the use of mood elements such as pictures, sculptures, landscape elements,
- the fragrance of the room, e.g. with a pine aroma in the surroundings of a topical island dedicated to hiking,
- the design of the TIC according to the season and its peak periods,
- etc.

Please do not hesitate to contact us for further information:

destinet.de
c/o Matthias Burzinski
Beringstraße 33
D-53115 Bonn
Mobil +49 (0)178-5060079
Fon +49 (0)228 85099164
botschaft@destinet.de

If you need further information about our monitoring system TI.MON, please visit http://timon.destinet.de or contact us for details.