

How to Communicate Sustainable Tourism Products Effectively to Customers

An explorative study presented at the World Tourism
Forum Lucerne 2013: Summary of selected results

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Companies and destinations generally face major challenges if they want to communicate the sustainability of their products to customers. These challenges arise because customers are often unable to identify the relevant sustainability attributes of a given product, unless explicitly communicated. This is because many sustainable product characteristics cannot be experienced directly by tourists. For example, it is impossible to see the source of energy supply, see how employees and suppliers are treated unless explicitly communicated.

Companies that developed sustainable products have a specific interest to communicate their commitment to sustainability and the benefits of their products. Companies can choose two principal avenues to communicate their sustainability related activities (Fig. 1). If aiming to communicate corporate commitment, a company needs to inform all stakeholders about its actions and performance. If the aim is to sell products, then the communication needs to focus on customers.

Empirical results about how to best market sustainable tourism products to customers are presented in this study. Using an experimental approach and a representative sample of tourists from the USA, UK, Germany and Switzerland, the study sets out to answer which kind of communications in a brochure about sustainable tourism products best appeal to customers.

The study also provides answers to the following questions:

- Should the communication (text and visualisation) focus on the emotional level?
- Do customers prefer rational information about the sustainability of their vacations?
- Does a graphical illustration of a sustainability attribute help to explain the product and does this increase purchase intention?
- What is the best way to integrate carbon offsetting in the product's marketing?

For the purposes of the study a fictive sustainable tourism product was designed as an experiment. This fictive product was aimed specifically at the mass market and did not in any way address the luxury segment. This report presents selected highlights from the study.

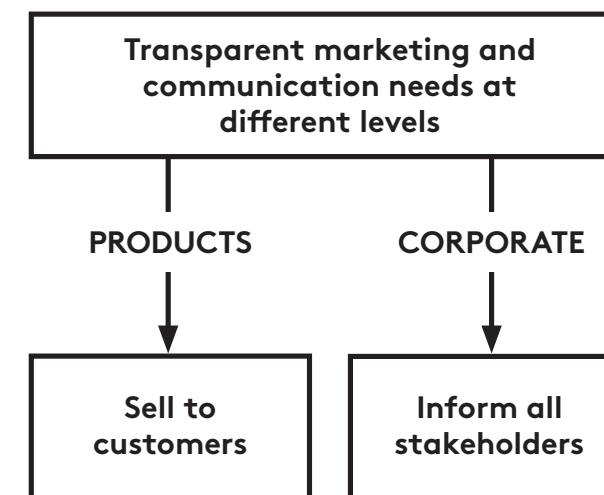


Figure 1. Aim of sustainability communications

Findings from the Literature

According to consumer behavioural research, tourist bookings can be understood based on a variety of rational, social, psychological or contextual factors that relate to both products and consumers.¹ How consumers effectively decide to buy a holiday package is partially related to how they process the information in ads and brochures. Typically, a travel brochure is considered effective when it results in customer bookings. How a tourist decides to purchase something is highly complex, involving a variety of cognitive and emotional processes and interactions between these.

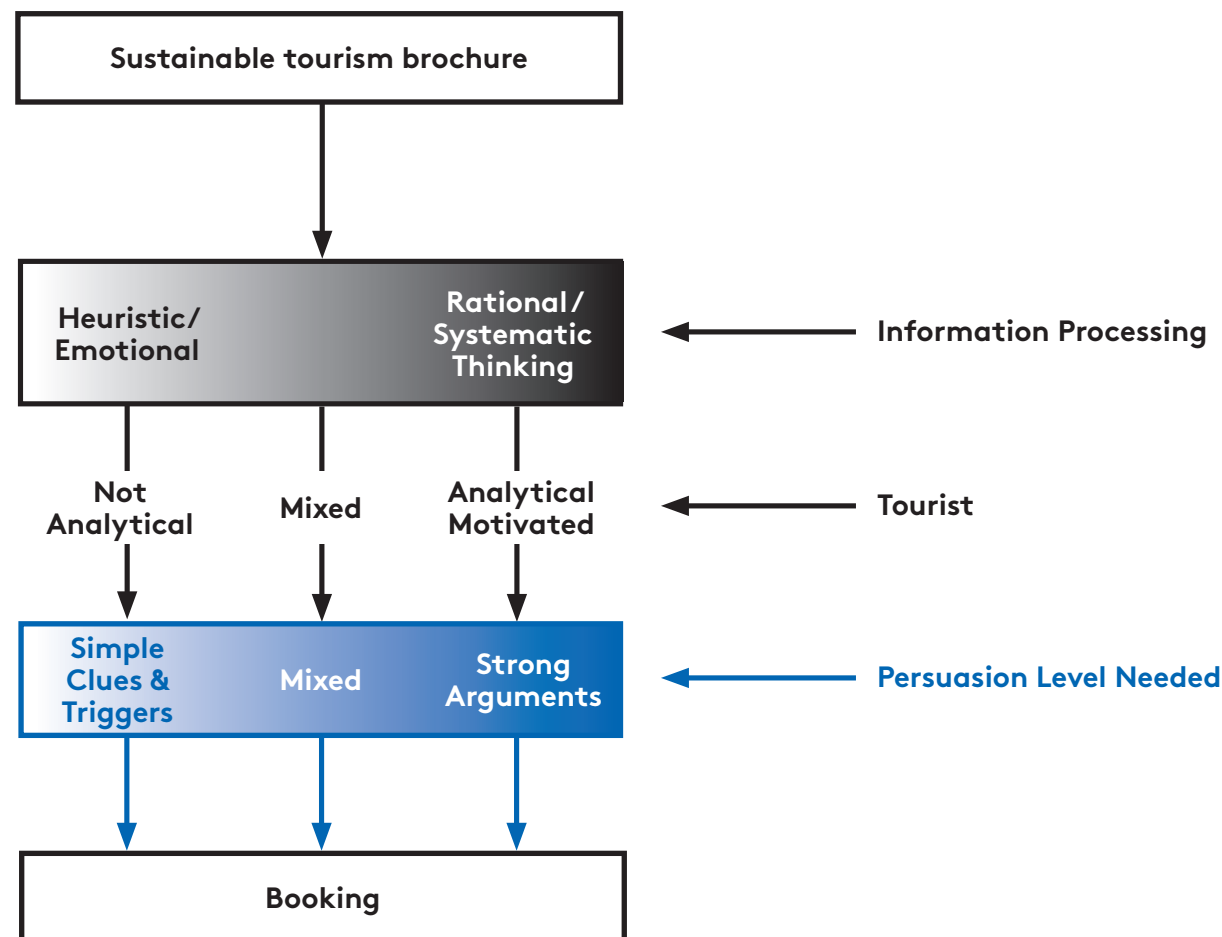


Figure 2. How a tourist might think about an ad in a sustainable tourism brochure

How does a tourist process the information in a travel brochure?

When a tourist considers a brochure or an ad's content by careful attention, deep and rational thinking occurs, and he or she is engaging in systematic information processing.² When a person processes information relatively automatically in an intuitive mode, heuristic information processing occurs.³ In this sense, ads in brochures can be classified as "thinking ads" or "emotional & feeling ads". Thinking ads usually contain information that requires significant cognitive processing, while the communication of ads designed to be emotional may purposefully trigger specific emotional reactions such as desire, feelings of joy, happiness and so on.^{4,5} Ads can be widely different, and include various elements from rationally or emotionally formulated texts, images, colour and a range of visual design features.⁶ Numerous contextual and other factors including attitudes and values also affect how people interpret ads in brochures, especially when considering green or sustainable products.⁷ Information interpretation may be vastly different according to socio-demographic, such as cultural and educational backgrounds.^{8,9}

Various communication and specifically persuasion theories attempt to explain the links between how information is processed by an individual and their likelihood to behave in a certain way as a result. Yet, it is not clearly established how tourists really process information about sustainable tourism products in brochures, or whether different tourist markets prefer more "thinking ads" over "emotional ads". However, research in green consumerism suggests that even already green consumers who normally favour pro-sustainability products have been shown to prefer simple information (like an energy rating label) about products in marketing communications.¹⁰

Sustainable Tourism Marketing

Sustainable tourism marketing aims to create awareness about pro-sustainability products, and to increase their purchasing.¹¹ Since sustainable tourism products are distinct from standard alternatives, a company needs to market these differently to the common 4-P producer oriented model.¹² Although numerous broad guidelines exist for marketing sustainable tourism products,

a major knowledge gap remains about the specific role emotional or rational message design and visual elements play in influencing booking choice.^{13,14} According to current guidelines, sustainable tourism marketing communication should be different in the following three ways.

Make stronger connections to the destination

- include specific information to reflect destination authenticity to foster respect towards it.¹⁵
- reflect heritage values and foster cultural sensitivity.¹⁶
- include elements of local food and culture if possible, as tourists with pro sustainability values desire to experience the "taste and feel" of a place.¹⁷

Raise awareness and educate

- inform tourists about their impact at the destination.^{18,19}
- encourage pro-environmental values and attitudes.²⁰
- mention relevant sustainability benefits of products to build favourable attitudes toward these.²¹

Be original and creative

- use original and authentic images to illustrate the uniqueness of the product, because images can induce both cognitive and emotional decision-making.²²
- include product labelling to symbolise commitment to sustainability since consumers are likely to perceive the product to be of quality.²³
- use a mix of oral, visual and written advertisement as every person has different styles of absorbing information.
- formulate text messages in a personalised, positive and non-threatening way so it directly addresses consumers.

Research Design

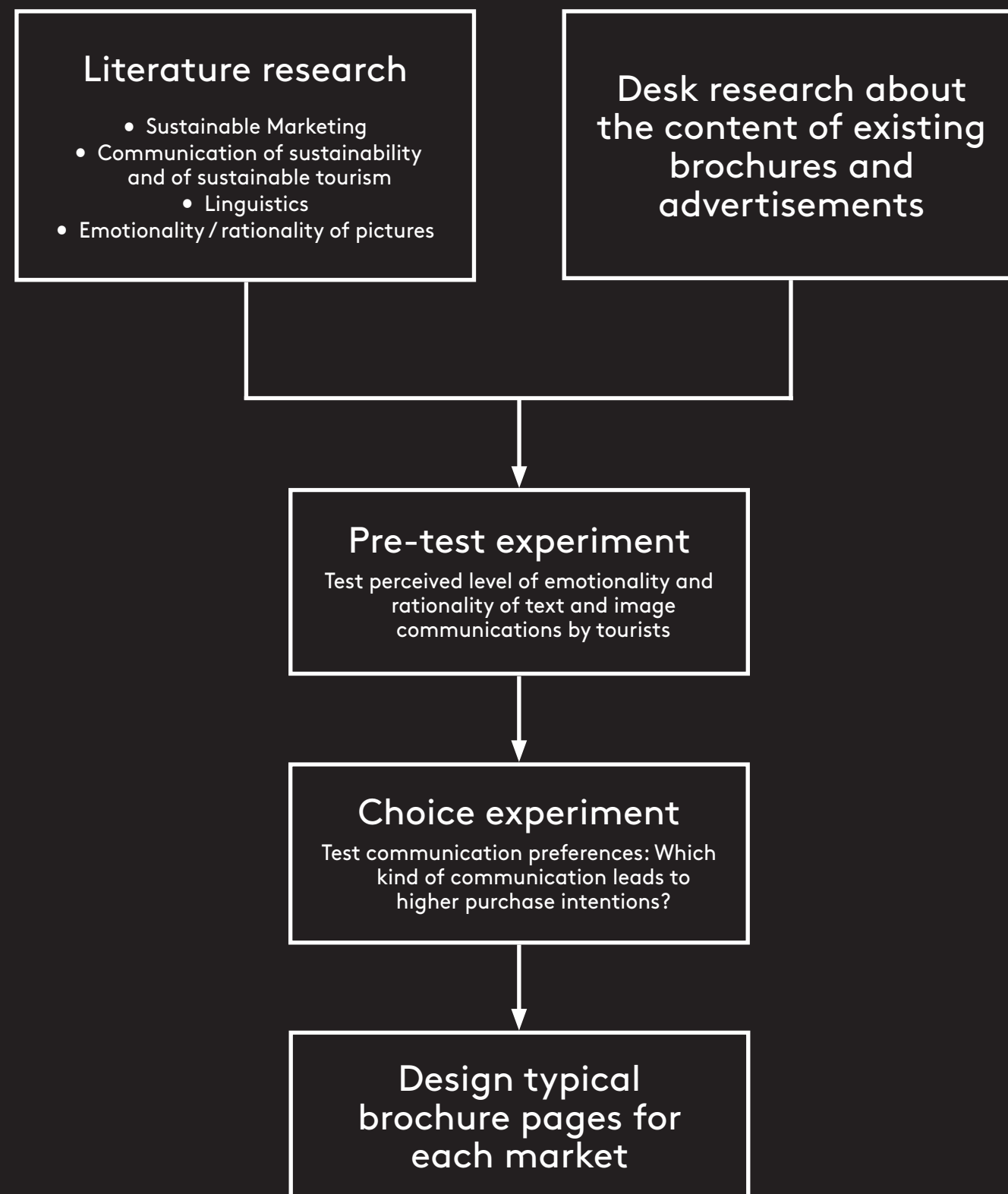


Figure 3: Methodological Framework for the Study

The project's research design consisted of desk research about the content of existing brochures and advertisements in relation to standard and sustainable tourism products, literature analysis and a two-phased empirical field survey conducted online in the USA, UK, Germany and Switzerland (Fig. 3). The online surveys were administered to at least 750 respondents per country in each phase.

Pre-test experiment

A pre-test experiment was conducted to determine the perceived level of emotionality and rationality of text and image communications by tourists. Different pictures and short text relating to the standard and sustainable characteristics of the product were shown to respondents. These pictures and texts were selected or created by a linguist and an expert in visual communication based on the existing academic findings in their field. During the experiment, each respondent rated each communication according to emotionality and rationality using standard measurement scales used in consumer research.

Choice experiment

To test communication preferences by potential customers, a choice experiment was conceived with different ways of communicating the features of a fictive holiday product. This product represented a typical mass tourism holiday in Menorca for European respondents. For the USA the product was located in Cancun, Mexico. The experiment did not vary the standard characteristics of the product, but different versions of the same product and its sustainability attributes were shown to respondents. Respondents then had to choose the preferred version from six sets, with two different versions in each set. The different sets varied according to the:

- level of emotionality addressed
- level of rationality of information
- the visualisation used by including a technical graph

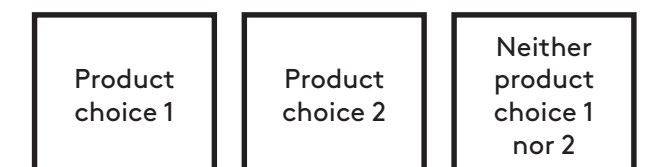


Figure 4. Stylised Choice Set

The combination of the pre-test and the choice experiment allowed analysing which level of emotionality and which level of rationality in the communication of sustainability *as perceived by the customer* is more likely to lead to increased purchase intention and is therefore best suited to successfully sell sustainable tourism products.

Here you can enjoy a sustainable stay:

Hotel Playa del Sol ****

1 WEEK
ALL-INCLUDED
FOR CHF 995.-

Go for a walk along the beach, have a snack in our open restaurant while viewing the ocean, and relax at our pool. For a bit more action, you can also ride with one of our electro-bikes to the nearby village of San Jaime. In the evening, you can help yourself to our expansive buffet or simply order from the menu. And without even noticing it, you will have made a huge difference to the environment:

Our swimming pool is heated by on-site solar panels. And since we treat water resources at our hotel ecologically, you will use only half as much water as you would at other hotels. We source food from farmers in the immediate vicinity. Not only does this cut CO₂ emissions but also benefits local trade. By the way: your flight is MyClimate carbon-offset.

Apartments near the beach

For your stay: the environmentally-friendly and air-conditioned hotel is adjacent to a long, sloping sand beach. It offers a total of 81 rooms. The roomy apartments contain a double bed, living room with pull-out bed, kitchenette, satellite TV as well as a balcony or terrace. Your room is cleaned daily with especially ecological and environmentally-friendly products.



«Hola, em dic Francisco Javier. If you get up early in the morning, you can watch me going out with my boat to bring in fishing nets. For lunch, you can already enjoy fresh fish on your plate – prepared by my cousin in the hotel kitchen. Bon profit!»



Regional roots

We serve you only the highest quality regional products. The souvenir shop sells handicrafts sourced solely from local artisans. The reception is staffed around the clock by local, English- and German-speaking receptionists. They will be happy to share with you their favorite spots on the island.



YOUR HOTEL OFFERS:

24-hour reception/check-out, safe, bureau de change, wifi, room and laundry service, bike hire.

3 restaurants, bar, souvenir shop, laundry room

Courtesy services: volleyball, basketball, table tennis, aerobic, fitness room, swimming pool. For a small charge: windsurfing, kayaking, bike hire, tennis, billiards.

Evening program with live music and DJs



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Main Findings

A total of 3005 respondents were obtained from Switzerland, Germany, UK and the USA. General findings are presented below and proceeding pages present country specific results. The overall findings suggest respondents' choice was mostly affected by the following communication elements (in order of importance):

1. technical graph showing greenhouse gas (CO₂ (-e)) emissions (with preferences for no graph)
2. pictures showing the beach/coast
3. text elements describing sustainability attributes in an emotional way (the level of emotionality was varied in the experiment)
4. texts relating to emotional aspects of the standard holiday product
5. texts describing sustainability in a rational way.

Analysis of results on a country basis revealed that all markets except Germany were influenced in the same order. For Germans, the picture ranked third and emotional text about sustainability fourth.

Tourists prefer technical graphs to be excluded

Although the graph was ranked first, the respondents prefer technical graphs to be excluded in a marketing brochure. Although this result shows the graph to be the most influential element in the ads, the inclusion of a technical graph actually lowered respondents' purchase intentions for the entire population surveyed. An example of such a "business-like" technical graph as it was used in the choice experiment is shown in Figure 6. Overall results indicate a preference for short statements about a specific sustainability attribute of a product (in this case the reduction of CO₂ (-e)-emissions in the resort).

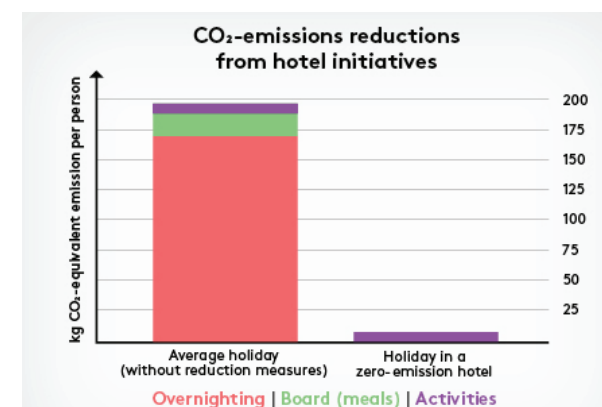


Figure 6. Graph as shown in the choice experiment

Tourists prefer emotional pictures

The results confirm people prefer the use of more emotional pictures. However, the picture does not need to put sustainability product features at the forefront necessarily, but serve in a classic aesthetic way showing "beautiful", "undisturbed landscapes" and "blue skies" in good lighting conditions.

Tourists prefer more emotional texts related to sustainability

The study generally confirms that people prefer more emotional communications about product related sustainability. This means people prefer texts like "we serve you only the highest quality regional products" to "regional products are served". The perceived emotionality of a text can be increased by telling a story, directly addressing the audience, using active sentence structure, adjectives, highly valued words and absolute formulations. The study also showed that emotionality is achieved differently in different countries and that instruments to increase the emotionality are only successful in certain markets. Interestingly, respondents were indifferent about the emotionality of the standard aspects of the product including the beach and restaurants. It seems that these features activate or awaken positive emotions independently of how they are communicated.

The study's findings were also used to design a "typically preferred" brochure page (as seen in Figures 5, 7 and 9). For each market, a different version is shown to highlight variations in communication preferences and this also illustrates the practical implications of this study. The brochure page on the left considers the main results and mainly communicates on an emotional level. The fisherman in the box in Figure 5 tells an emotional story and directly addresses the audience about the sustainability of the product without delivering any rational argumentation. Additionally, a lot of active formulations and adjectives are used everywhere in the brochure to increase the text's emotionality. Some findings are also integrated from the literature research which suggest a need for strong connection to the destination using elements of authentic local food and associated culture. Additionally, the communication messages are designed positively.

Sustainable stays:

Hotel Playa del Sol****

1 WEEK
ALL-INCLUDED
FOR 815 EURO



OFFER / AMENITIES:

Reception, safe, bureau de change, wifi, room and laundry service, bike hire.

3 restaurants, bar, souvenir shop, laundry room

Courtesy services: volleyball, basketball, table tennis, aerobic, fitness room, swimming pool. For a small charge: windsurfing, kayaking, bike hire, tennis, billiards. Evening program with live music and DJs

We employ only local staff, pay fair salaries, and offer pleasant working conditions.

Your flight is carbon-offset. We offer electro-bikes.

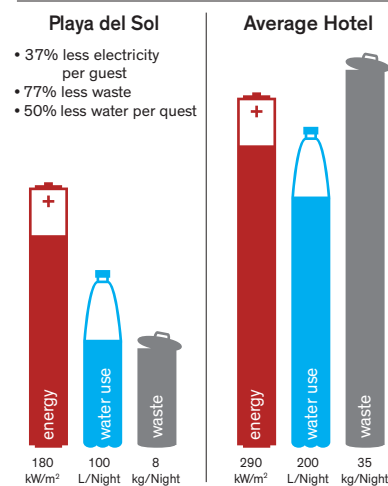
We treat water resources in the hotel and garden ecologically.

Our solar panels offer both energy and hot water.

We recycle more than 50% of our waste products.

More than 50% of our ingredients in the kitchen are sourced within 20km.

OUR BALANCE SHEET FOR THE ENVIRONMENT



Long, sloping sand beaches are located only 100m from the hotel. In nearby Son Bou and San Jaime (approx. 400m) several restaurants, bars and shopping areas can be found.

Your Accommodation:

The traditionally-designed hotel offers a total of 81 rooms. The swimming pool with its sun terrace and complimentary deckchairs is heated by on-site solar panels. The hotel offers an open restaurant with a view of the ocean, a main restaurant, and a snack bar / pizzeria. The reception is staffed around the clock by local, English- and German-speaking receptionists. The souvenir shop sells handicrafts sourced solely from local artisans.

Appartments:

Roomy, environmentally-friendly and air-conditioned rooms with double beds,

living room with pull-out bed, kitchenette, satellite TV, balcony or terrace. **Room cleaning with ecological products, which can be naturally decomposed in a short time.** Available for 2 – 4 persons.

Board:

In the morning you can help yourself to the breakfast buffet. Lunch is available from our menu, dinner both from the menu and a buffet. **We serve you only the highest quality regional products.** Not only does this cut CO₂ emissions but also benefits local trade.



»Hola, em dic Francisco Javier. If you get up early in the morning, you can watch me going out with my boat to bring in fishing nets. For lunch, you can already enjoy MSC-certified fresh fish on your plate. Thanks to Hotel Playa del Sol, which I have been supplying for the last 12 years, I can support myself and my family with a secure income.«

Figure 7. Brochure page showing the results for sustainable tourists

Results for different customer segments

Rational communication of sustainability is only a supplement

Rational communication about sustainability such as additional and objective information using a lot of nouns was the least important to impact respondent choice. However, in some countries it was still somewhat preferred and for certain market segments, it may be a beneficial additional communication to emotional elements.

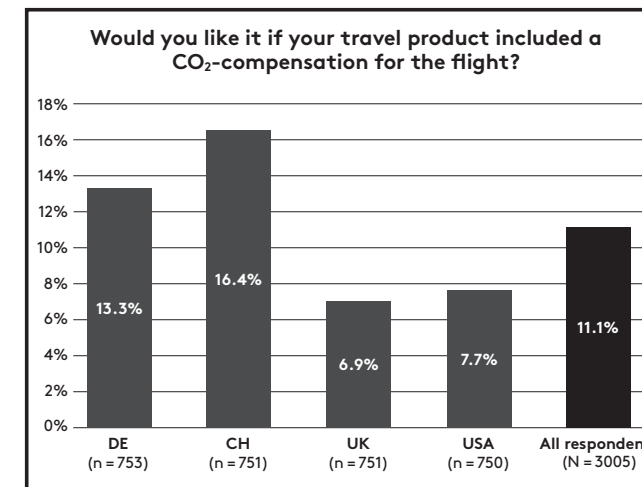


Figure 8. Respondent distribution according to past sustainable tourism purchase behaviour

For tourists who have already booked sustainable tourism products, rational communication is more important especially if they contain information about sustainability. Therefore, rational formulations delivering objective additional information like "Room cleaning with ecological products, which naturally decompose in a short time" are used instead of the less preferred "Room cleaning especially with ecological and environmentally-friendly products." as shown in Figure 7. Also, the use of fewer pictures decreases the perceived emotionality of the whole page. The most prominent representation of rational argumentation is the right column in Figure 7, because it contains information about the sustainability of the hotel in a rational way. However, a large part of the text is still written in an emotional style, because it is still (slightly) more important. This is visible for example, in the box with the fisherman. The text is mostly the same as in the brochure page in Figure 5. But it was enriched with some additional information and details. Additionally, a graph was added in the right column of the brochure page which shows how sustainable the product is. This graph does not look as business-like as in the choice experiment. One of the reasons why the respondents did not like the graph could be that its style was not considered appropriate for a fun activity such as a holiday.

Tourists who have already booked a sustainable tourism product

To compare different tourists markets according to their past pro-sustainability consumer habits, respondents were split into two groups. Group one represented those who have already purchased sustainable tourism products in the past and the other group those who have not.

A total of 11.1% of respondents has already bought a sustainable tourism product in the past (Fig. 8). Further analysis of this selected respondent category was conducted to determine which communication elements influenced their product choice the most. This revealed that rational sustainability product communication is more important for tourists who have already booked sustainable tourism products. However, emotional communication of sustainability was still the most important part of the brochure page (except in the UK), but the rational argumentation had almost the same importance for this customer group.

Furthermore, both German and US tourists who have already booked a sustainable tourism product appeared to be positively influenced by the inclusion of the technical graph in the brochure, which suggests higher purchase intentions by these specific market segments.

Information about tourists' impact at the destination

The illustrative brochure page in Figure 7 tries to inform tourists about their impact at the destination which is recommended in some of the articles in the academic literature. However, this should only be done with customers who have already booked a sustainable tourism product because this is rational information that would not increase the purchase intention of non-experienced tourists.

Recharge your batteries sustainably!

Hotel Playa del Sol ****

1 WEEK
ALL-INCLUDED
FOR USD 995.-



Did you know that you could save up to 185 gallons of water per week just by staying at our hotel? And that 2.5 pounds CO₂ less is released into the atmosphere when you drink a local instead of a European wine?



«Hola, mi nombre es Francisco Javier. If you get up early in the morning, you can watch me going out with my boat to bring in fishing nets. For lunch, you can already enjoy fresh fish on your plate – prepared by my cousin in the hotel kitchen. Buen Provecho!»

Recharge:

Go for a walk along the beach, have a snack in our open restaurant while viewing the ocean, and relax at our salt-water pool. For a bit more action, you can participate in our beach-cleaning in the early morning. Not only will you get your appetite going for our all-you-can-eat buffet, you can improve your Spanish by speaking to the locals. In any case, fun awaits you! In the evening, you can help yourself to our expansive buffet or simply order from the menu.

We take care of our resources:

Our swimming pool is heated by on-site solar panels. And since we treat water resources at our hotel ecologically, you will use only half as much water as you would at other hotels. We source food from farmers in the immediate vicinity. Not only does this cut CO₂ emissions but also benefits local trade.

Roomy Apartments near the beach:

You'll stay in an environmentally-friendly and air-conditioned hotel adjacent to a long, sloping beach. The roomy apartments contain a double bed, living room with pull-out bed, kitchenette, satellite TV as well as a balcony or terrace. Your room is cleaned daily with especially ecological and environmentally friendly products.



Regional Roots

We serve you only the highest quality regional products. Support local artisans by buying handmade products in our souvenir shop where handicrafts sourced solely from local artisans are sold. Our local receptionists are there for you around the clock. They will be happy to share with you their favorite spots on the island.



YOUR HOTEL OFFERS:

81 modern rooms / 24-hour reception/check-out, safe, currency exchange, wifi, room and laundry service, bike rental.

3 restaurants, bar, souvenir shop, laundry room

Courtesy services: volleyball, basketball, table tennis, aerobic, fitness room, swimming pool. For a small charge: windsurfing, kayaking, bike hire, tennis, billiards.

Evening program with live music and DJs



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Figure 9. Brochure page illustrating results for the US

Results for different customer segments

Gender

Although the preferences do not significantly differ between the gender groups, the different parts of a brochure page have different importance levels. Women assign more importance to more emotional features of the brochure. For women, the picture is also more important (except in Switzerland), as well as the emotional description of the standard features of a beach holiday (except in the UK). Some of the rational parts have a bigger influence on men's purchase intention, such as the graph (except in the USA) and the rational textual argumentation of the sustainability of the product in the USA and in Switzerland.

Education

There are some interesting changes in the importance if the market is segmented with respect to the education of respondents. The influence of the picture is generally smaller the higher the education level of the customer (except in the USA). Showing the sustainability feature of a tourism product with a graph has a higher importance for better educated people across all markets except in the USA.

Country specific result for the USA

There are some interesting country specific results. The most important textual feature of a brochure page is the emotional sustainability communication about the product. However, people perceive the emotionality of texts differently in the USA than in Europe. For example, a request-like formulation such as "support the local artisans by buying handmade products in our souvenir shop" leads to higher emotional levels in the USA than in the UK, Germany and Switzerland. Furthermore, the provoked emotions are rather negative in Europe. These findings suggest that increasing the perceived emotionality of a brochure page by using requests can lead to higher purchase intentions in the USA.

The brochure page in Figure 9 shows an illustrative example of how a more direct and educative approach could look like in a brochure. Already in the introduction, it delivers some information about the sustainability of the vacation in an educational style.

How should CO₂-offsetting be integrated?

The second part of the survey also included questions about greenhouse gas (CO₂ (-e)) offsetting. This is an important aspect of sustainable tourism, because transport is the main emission contributing factor, accounting up to 80% of total tourism related CO₂ (-e) emissions (according to most studies). In this context, the sustainability attribute of a tourism product needs to address CO₂ (-e) emissions. Around two thirds of the respondents would like if their sustainable travel product included a CO₂ (-e) compensation for the flight (Fig. 10). This was most accepted in Germany, where 71% of respondents preferred this, followed by Switzerland (70%) and the UK (69%). In the United States the agreement rate was lower, however the majority of respondents (63%) also preferred the inclusion of carbon offsetting.

The offsetting of CO₂ (-e) can be integrated in a travel product in various ways. It can be an integral part of the product's pricing and so a customer automatically compensates their emissions when purchasing the product. Another option is to offer customers the choice to opt out of purchasing offsets if they do not want to buy such products. The last option is to include compensation as an additional add-on feature to be purchased with the product where customers have to actively "opt-in".

According to the study, the most preferred way of integrating CO₂ (-e) offsetting in all countries was to enable consumers to opt-out (Fig. 11). The second most preferred type is the obligatory integration. Interestingly, more people preferred this type of compensation in Germany and Switzerland, as these countries also represent higher proportion of respondents who already booked a sustainable tourism product in the past 12 months.

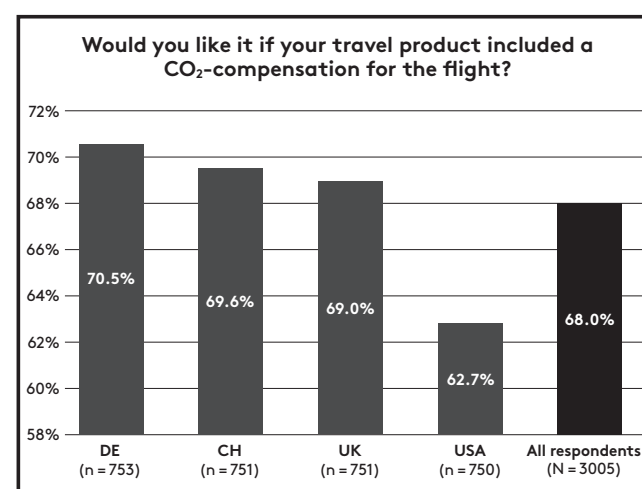


Figure 10. Preferences for including carbon offsetting in a sustainable product

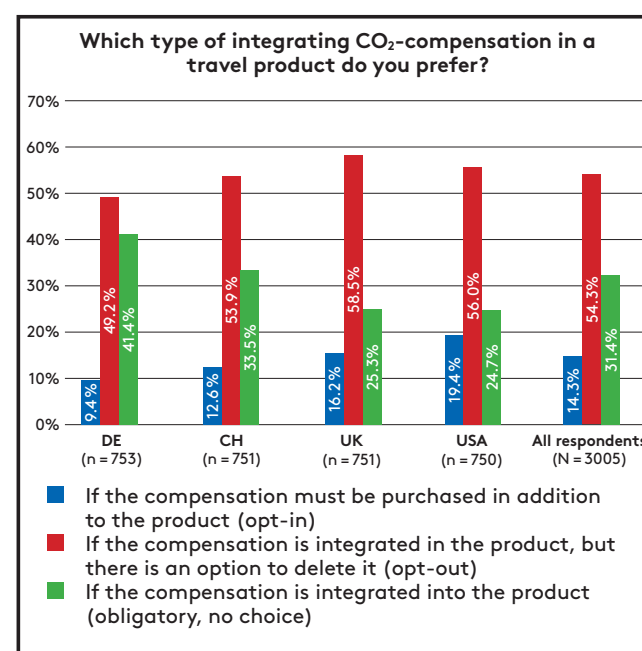


Figure 11. Preferred types of integrating carbon offsetting in a travel product

Recommendations for industry

This report presents the highlights of an empirical study which confirms the importance of emotionality in the marketing and communication of tourism products that include sustainability attributes.

As personal sustainability benefits of a tourism product are not always obvious or visible for customers, especially before experiencing the product per se, it is essential to communicate these features related to sustainability in a way that reaches consumers at the emotional level. In this context, companies can increase the emotionality of their sustainable tourism marketing texts by including:

- Narratives that involve personal dialogue in relation to the product
- Text that directly addresses the consumer
- Actively formulated texts
- Adjectives that include highly valued words for example "perfect", "superior" etc.
- Absolutely formulated texts for example "exclusively", "always", "never" etc.

Generally, requests should not be used because they do not affect the emotions positively. However, this study also confirms that certain markets have particular features that require slight adjusting of product related sustainability communication. The USA is such a special case, where requests affect the emotions and therefore purchase intention positively.

Overall, rational communications about tourism products act only as a supplement and do not have a high, positive influence on purchase intentions. But there is again an exception: If the target group consists of those who have already bought a sustainable tourism product, rational communication becomes more important. The rationality of texts can typically be increased by delivering additional explanations, providing objective information and by the use of nouns.

The overall findings of the study highlights that the use of graphs with quantitative data about the sustainability of the product is most suited for market segments which are already consumers of sustainable tourism. Therefore, the use of technical graphs is not recommended for the marketing of sustainable tourism products to broad, or mass market segments.

If a company's product includes sustainability attributes such as greenhouse gas emission compensation, it is recommended that the compensation is presented as an "opt out".

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