
Why DMOs and Tourism Organizations Do not Really 'Get/Attract Visitors': Uncovering the Truth behind a Cargo Cult

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Abstract

The term "getting visitors" is a colloquial expression of the assumption that tourist organizations of all sorts (DMOs) (Destination Marketing/Management Organizations) can attract new or additional visitors to a destination especially by using communication tools. In this article, we use well-founded scientific studies, critical reasoning, and practical considerations to argue that this assumption rarely holds. Eleven selected myths surrounding the practice of DMOs are critically examined and characterized as a cargo cult. It turns out that huge effort is put into creating extremely little added value in terms of additional visitors. The consequences, especially for today's "marketing-oriented" DMOs, are far-reaching. DMOs still have legitimacy. But this must be based on the original rationale behind DMOs, specifically as a solution to instances of market failure in public spaces.

Keywords: DMO, "getting visitors", "attracting visitors" cargo cult, destination marketing, destination communication, destination branding

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1 Introduction

We believe that destination marketing and management operate under a number of misunderstandings and false beliefs. Over the past ten years or so, we have increasingly observed that a number of principles derived from research and practice have taken on a momentum that has brought an entire generation of tourist professionals (practitioners and academics alike) to subscribe to theories that do not hold up at all or only partially under careful scrutiny. In our view, this development is disconcerting, since among other things following this dogma leads to actions that generate high costs while proving useless or at best highly ineffective. In this article we attempt to explain the following:

1. We expose as "myths" a total of eleven beliefs and action logics that in our view are untenable;
2. We apply scientific findings and lines of argument to these eleven myths to demonstrate that these beliefs may in fact be myths rather than facts;
3. At the same time, we include critically reflected practical knowledge, or in other words, common-sense;
4. We thereby encourage the reader to pause and reflect on real travel behavior, from both personal experience and observation.

Before proceeding with this in the next chapter, we note that our argumentation may sound somewhat polemical. Our observations are however based on actual discussions and observations in the field as well as from academia, not only in Alpine countries and Switzerland but also from our work on an international level. It is obvious that no single destination or its management and/or marketing organization (DMO) subscribes to all eleven myths at the same time. Still, we have encountered combinations of these eleven myths in every possible variation in the reasoning of destination representatives. This article should not be understood as a provocation, but as a well-intentioned and serious critical examination of supposed facts using scientific findings and arguments. This is not about engaging in "DMO Bashing." At the end in fact we offer ideas on how to further develop the work of such organizations, which we still regard as important actors in tourism marketing, where this marketing is understood as taking into account all instruments and dimensions. The reader is invited to critically examine in turn the case we make in this article in the hope that this will produce a fruitful discussion from which everyone can learn. We would be gratified with this outcome.

When we speak of DMOs in this article, we mean local, regional, and national tourism organizations or agencies. Normally a fine distinction would be made between the tasks of these organizations. But based on the assumption that all these organizations "acquire/get visitors," all of them follow the same thought patterns and carry out the same activities. In fact, in practice we observe that many of the activities described in this article are being pursued by DMOs at all levels.

2 The Myths and their impact

Here we introduce several myths prevalent in science and practice that originated in the belief that DMOs can bring visitors to a destination. In other words, it is assumed that a local, regional or national

tourism organization or agency has the means and capabilities to influence tourists in such a way that they come to a destination precisely because of the efforts of the DMO. This belief is historically rooted in the 1970s at the latest, when advertising and communication became more important, especially for consumer goods. At that time, tourism directors across the world had to legitimize themselves, their organizations, and their use of additional state revenues and taxes. But first things first.

Myth 1: Destination branding by DMOs brings visitors to the destination.

Popular science publications today propagate the belief that a brand created by a DMO brings (more) visitors to a destination. In most cases, an advertising agency is hired to carry out an extensive analysis of the destination, with the result that some abstract terms and features (e.g. "brand core") are crystallized. In at least as extensive brand processes, which are also known as "brand strategies" or simply "strategic processes," possible projects and in particular advertising content are formulated for selected geographic markets or general target groups. As costly and involved as these processes are, they generally produce little of consequence. Often they generate (1) a new logo and (2) a new communications campaign. In research, this approach has been questioned for some time (e.g. Anholt, 2008).

Counterargument: Destination brands of DMOs are at best (territorial) markers.

To date, there are virtually no serious studies on the effectiveness of destination branding, especially in the case where entire countries are not destinations. At any rate, the impact of advertising seems to be very low not only for destinations but even for single visitor businesses (Stienmetz, Maxcy, & Fesenmaier, 2015). We therefore thoroughly examined this topic in a recent study (Beritelli & Laesser, 2018). The majority of practitioners and researchers are liable to four fundamental fallacies or errors of reasoning:

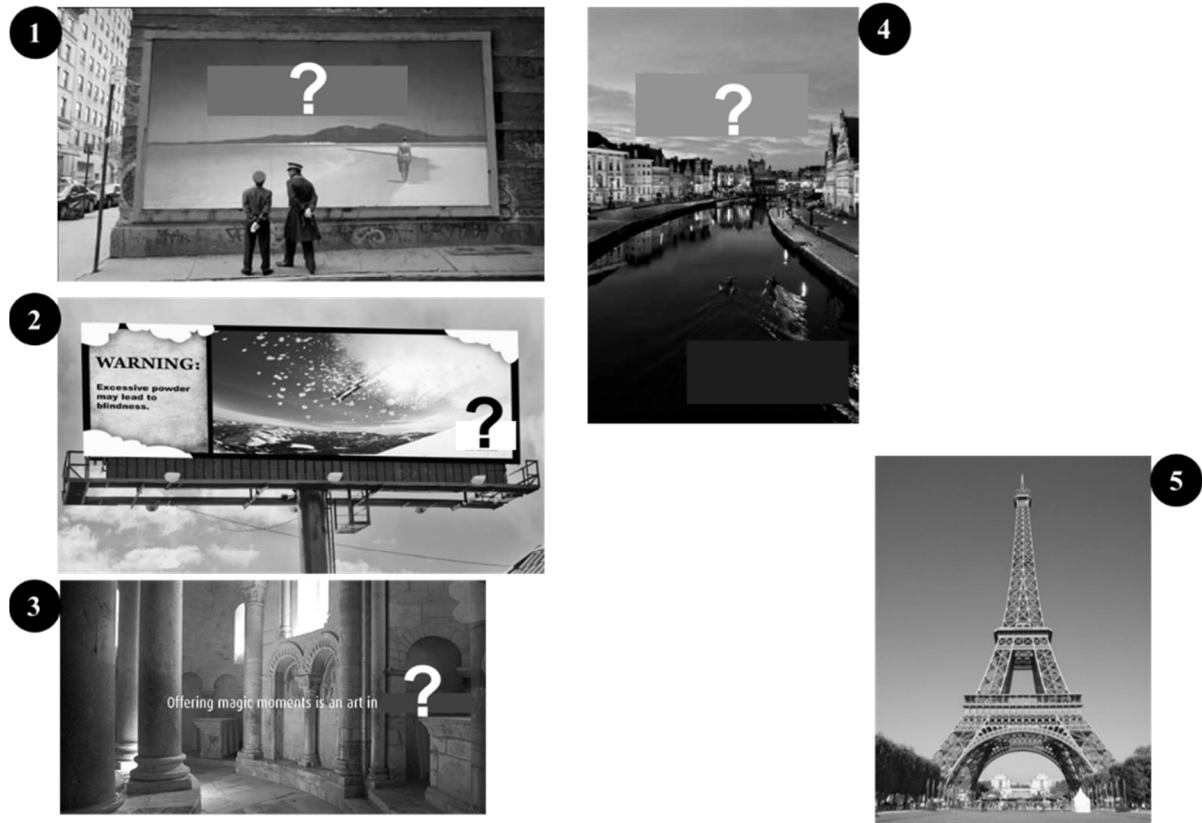
Fallacy 1: "reverse branding." By this we mean that the name of a place, region, or country has often been known as a geographical name for centuries, and images of such places have likewise been formed over a long period of time. Brand consultants and destination managers misappropriate this fact by first talking about a currently world-famous place in their presentations and then, for example, making a connection to the logo of the corresponding DMO. In this way, they insinuate that the public's knowledge of the destination is due to the DMO's good branding. However, in reality the place's name has been around for a long time, and when we talk about such places, we do not have DMO logos with their brand names or their communication content in mind. Well-known geographical names of places or regions are much older, are mostly not rooted in tourism, and are more prominent in the minds of the visitors than touristic keywords and associations combined with a logo deliberately created by the DMO for that purpose.

Another erroneous approach (fallacy 2) is the argument that well-known consumer or capital goods brands should serve as models for destination brands. First, the argument goes, consumer brands like i-Phone or Coca-Cola are famous and unmistakable because companies with marketing departments and large budgets stand behind them. It is then suggested that the same can be done for places and

regions. However, a tourist destination is obviously not a product prefabricated by the provider, but rather an experience space that makes various resources available to the visitor. In fact, you can take all your own vacation trips as examples and ask yourself what the product was and who actually (co)-produced what. You yourself were so strongly and prominently involved in the co-production of your experiences that one can actually speak of the traveler as co-producer (Beritelli & Bieger, 2015; Kaspar, 1995; Maggi, 2014; Smith, 1994). Even if you visit the same place twice, you will (co) produce completely different experiences. Your memories and associations change with every new experience. This is because a destination is not a product that objectively and factually provides the same functions and benefits to all consumers¹. In a tourist destination, providers provide at best combinable elements for a coherent experience. To assume that a DMO should have control over the brand management and the corresponding experiences during the stay bespeaks a huge over-estimation of its importance.

Fallacy 3: "Blurry communication" Ultimately, it is claimed that it is primarily about the communication content and not the logo. After all, no one would make such an effort for just a logo. Destination managers and their consultants often say: "A brand is not a logo." And yet it is exactly that, since DMOs can only transmit general, vague, interchangeable messages because of their limited resources, the heterogeneity of the various visitor resources and offers in "their" space, and their strong dependence on their stakeholders. Thus, they violate the basic principles of branding, such as clear positioning through differentiation, uniqueness of services, competitive position, clearly defined target group(s), long-lasting consistency in behavior, and so on. The logo is often the only constant and thus the message's only recognition feature. And this is often not clearly recognizable either. On the other hand, unique attractions – at best unique services, cultural expression and the like – are recognizable. Let us illustrate this briefly. The illustration below shows that for cases 1-4, there is no chance of recognizing which places or regions are being discussed, precisely because the logo has been covered over. There are very few places in the world (e.g. Paris) that are world-famous thanks to strong "markers" (attractions, events, or such). A photo of such a place has no need for a logo or a "brand."

¹ The use of the term "product" in relation to travel generally leads to erroneous conclusions because it is assumed in tourism a supplier produces something and then prices and sells it according to demand. The actual production process, however, is triggered by the travelers themselves through their travels and is gradually formed into an experience through their own decisions. To speak of "products" offered by a service provider is to use an incorrect term, which often leads to an inflated estimation of the providers' role in this process. Put accurately, they only provide services. Package tours as well are not "products" but should be more accurately termed a bundle of services (or services with a specific price) and understood as such.

Figure 1: No logo, no recognition due to "blurry communication"

Source: (Beritelli & Laesser, 2018)

The fourth fallacy was revealed in a study (Beritelli & Laesser, 2018). Here, 1.600 respondents were asked in each of four famous Swiss destinations (4 x 400) to recognize the right logo next to three wrong ones; first for the place they were currently visiting and then for the other three destinations. The ones who recognized it best were the interviewees who were in each place and in places where the logo was seen practically everywhere. Zermatt, which is plastered over with logos, had the highest recognition. Respondents in the group coming in second place were in locales they had previously visited. It was found that the less time that had elapsed since their previous trip to this destination, the more likely the respondents were to guess the correct logo. The worst recognition of a logo was by respondents who had never been to the destination and, if they had seen the logo at all, had seen it in the media. In this last case, they mostly misidentified it. Indeed, the impact of advertising is highly dependent on the frequency (as often as possible) and recency (as recent as possible) of the messages (Higgins & King, 1981; Levin, Joiner, & Cameron, 2001; Nelson, 2002; Zajonc, 1968). Even the largest budgets² are not enough to enshrine a lasting, clear message.

² The Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority has a total budget of approximately US\$350 million, with a large portion, actually more than US\$100 million, spent for advertising. Do you also remember their advertising campaign, if you saw it? Is that why you went to Las Vegas, if you ever did?

We conclude that destination brands can be used at most for a few, clearly delimitable spaces (e.g. cultural attractions) or then, in a reduced form, as a territorial marker, similar to a municipal coat of arms or the place name sign at the entry/exit of a town. This has unequivocally to do with the original definition of a trademark. For example, Kotler assigned "brand name" early on as an attribute of the product and not as part of "promotion" (Kotler, 1980). Today, we still define the brand as an attribute that sets our product/service apart from others: "... [a brand is ...] name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers. (AMA, 2010; K. L. Keller, 2003).» So if you're looking for your favorite shampoo on a supermarket shelf and quickly recognize it, it's been well "branded" (i.e. marked, labelled).

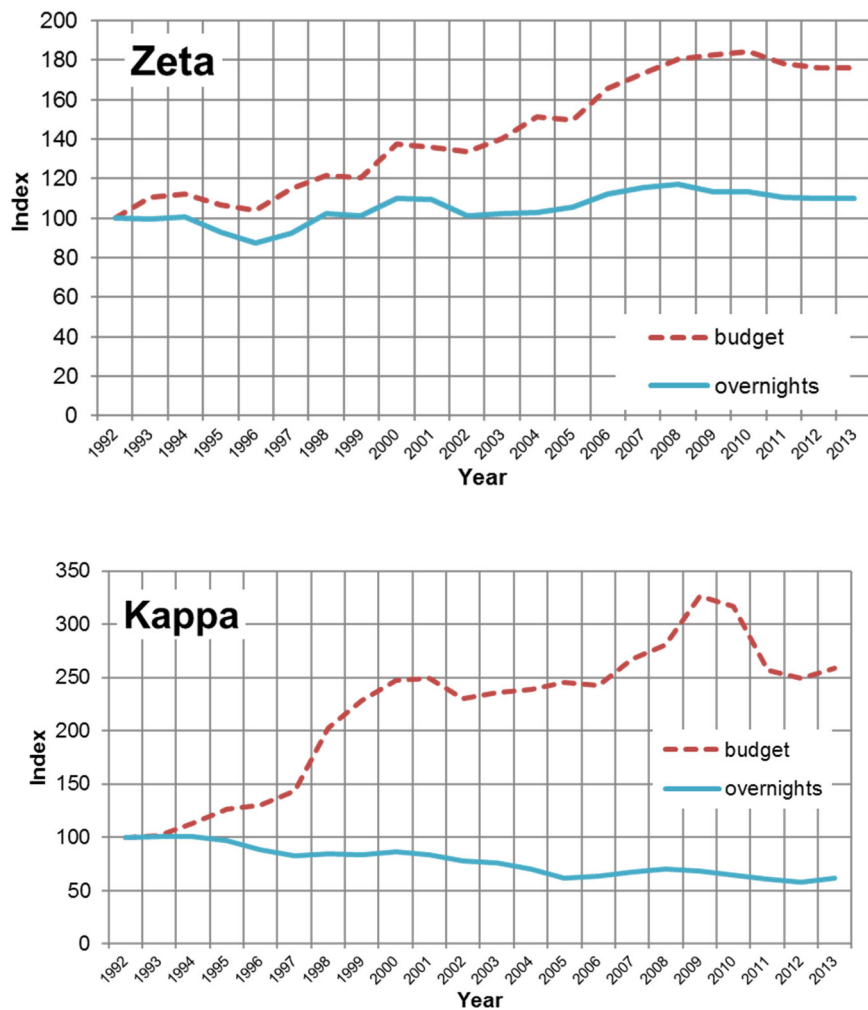
Myth 2: The more communication DMOs engage in («buzz/ background noise»), the more visitors will come.

This myth ties in with the first myth. Here it is maintained that you simply have to engage in a lot of communication. Somehow, at some point, you will be noticed. The marketing mix – more technically correct – the communication mix, is misunderstood in such a way that as many channels of communication are used for 'market development'.³ In the end, travelers will surely remember the advertisement or the communication message and then book a corresponding trip. In reality, though, the marketing mix or the communication mix presupposes that the provider thoroughly understands the effect of the various instruments and uses only the one with the strongest leverage. Anyone who uses all channels of communication either has no knowledge about their effect and/or too much money at his or her disposal.

Counterargument: DMO-driven communication to attract visitors rarely reaches the (potential) visitors.

If, as established by the study described above for Myth 1, DMO-initiated communication is only rarely and too briefly perceived, it is clear that only fragments of this message will remain in people's memories. In the worst case a message sent for Destination A is kept in mind by the potential visitors as a message for a similarly equipped, comparable Destination B. The following illustration shows how this myth has led to ever-increasing expenditure on destination communication. Of the two anonymous vacation destinations in Switzerland, overnight stays and the budget were indexed. The figure shows how, despite stagnation and continued declines in overnight stays, increasing amounts of money are being spent by DMOs largely on communication. In phase 1, the traditional tasks of a tourist office are still being performed. Since the 1990s, people have been scrambling to increase budgets for "destination marketing" (which means primarily communication) (point 2). Today, this belief has become so deeply rooted that no one questions whether it makes sense (point 3). The competition is always increasing and more and more must be spent on communication to be noticed. In actuality, however, DMOs' activities are marketing frills.

³ In this context, the term "market development" is curiously overblown. It is assumed that one can influence a market for one's own purposes in the same way as one can for example pre-prepare dough to make a good bread. In reality, the travelers decide and act in all manners except as the DMO desires.

Figure 2: Race for "Destination Marketing" leads to continuously increasing DMO budgets

Source: (Beritelli, Reinhold, Laesser, & Bieger, 2015, p. 121)

The so-called "buzz/ background noise" or, in other words, the attempt to engage in communication because everyone else does, falls short and shows that DMOs have no idea exactly which clear message should be sent to which target group. The term "buzz/ background noise" hints at the belief that one should not miss anything, especially where putative competitors are concerned⁴. This also produces the institutionally driven version of this myth, which has generated another misnomer of destination marketing: "Have a high profile/ Show presence."

⁴ This puts the tourism experts in good company with other industries: Various advertising studies have shown that companies often advertise because their competitors have done so, for ex-ample with detergent ads on television.

Myth 3: The more the DMOs are present ("Have a high profile/ Show presence"), the more visitors will come.

This term is used above all for public fairs or other events at which DMOs can present themselves at a stand. "Presence" is also shown in the media by introducing a new campaign to "attract visitors," for example".

Counterargument: The DMOs are present where their financial backers are located and where other DMOs are present.

To debunk this myth, a few critical questions and common sense are sufficient. Have you ever gone to a travel fair to plan a trip? When you went to the travel fair, did you bring along any documents or information that you used to book your trip with? If so, was this at a DMO's stand or at a tour operator's who advertised specific offers? How many times has it happened to you that you were so impressed by a DMO stand at a public fair or other sports or cultural event that you went straight home and booked a trip, or recalled this impression years later and booked then? It has long been recognized that public fairs count for next to nothing in travelers' decisions (a value of 1.14 on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 4 (very strongly); only radio and TV-advertisements score worse (T Bieger & Laesser, 2004).

In actuality, showing presence has more to do with institutional representation. In truth, large sums of money are spent on stands at expos and fairs where other regions and countries are also represented. Many destination managers then allow themselves to be blinded by the appearance of their "competitors" and hope to look good in the eyes of their paying stakeholders, including politicians. They make these comparisons without realizing that their actual potential visitors do not frequent these venues or do not use them to make their travel decisions. In the end, however, all the stakeholders present there are satisfied because they have seen "their" destination represented. In this way, this myth has stubbornly persisted for decades.

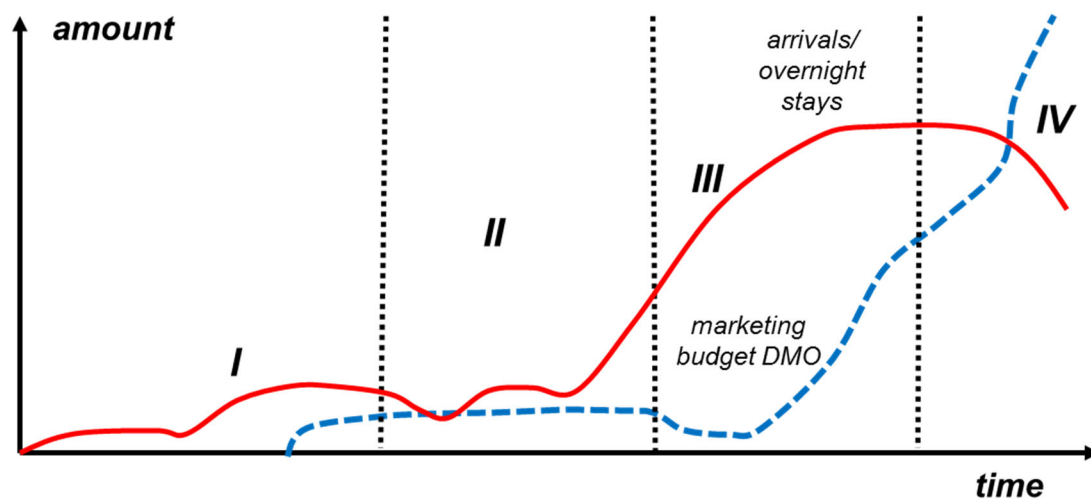
Myth 4: The more marketing DMOs do, the more visitors will come.

In the 1980s tourism researchers themselves lent weight to this mistaken notion. For periods and countries in which tourism increased, correlations (A and B are related) or more advanced regressions (A leads to B) were manufactured between DMOs' (marketing) budgets and arrivals/overnight stays. The results were sometimes significant and positive (e.g. Uysal & Crompton, 1984; Uysal & O'Leary, 1986).

Counterargument: The vast majority of the "evidence" for this is either spurious correlations or even inverse causalities.

Spurious or pseudo-correlations are the curse of statistics as well as a constant danger, even for economists. They arise when the researcher examines the relationship between two variables using probability statistics. Significant and even strong relationships can also appear between two variables which (1) have nothing at all to do with one another and/or (2) where just the right data points or the appropriate years are found that produce a significant correlation. The reason for these problems is simple: An equation represents the same thing in different ways on both sides. An equal sign can thus never establish a causality that specifies the direction or the influence (cf. the chicken-and-egg problem). Obvious cases of pseudo-correlations are entertaining (Vigen, 2015). But significant relationships between the (marketing) expenditures of the DMOs and statistical quantities such as arrivals or overnight stays can always be constructed if a suitable period is selected and ever more is spent for destination marketing. The sketches below show four different cases. In the first case (Quadrant I) we find destinations and countries that because of their remoteness, for example, are still very rarely visited. At the same time institutions and organizations are of limited significance, because the state provides few services or because the areas are sparsely populated. Remote areas and regions such as large parts of Russia, Central African countries, and Greenland are in this category. But there are also numerous cases in Quadrant II. DMOs are hardly present here and offer at best local information. Here the role of institutions is limited or the state lacks financial and personnel resources. Tourism, on the other hand, is flourishing and the destination is enjoying increasing numbers of visitors. Mediterranean destinations, especially in countries such as Italy, Greece as well as the Balkans, where budgets are no longer used for tourism, can be found in this quadrant. But comparisons can be made with neighboring destinations. For example, the German shore of Lake Constance is currently registering a rapid increase in the number of visitors without the DMOs having received larger budgets (Case II). By contrast, the number of visitors on the Swiss side is stagnating, despite stable or increasing DMO expenditures (Case IV).

The myth that has encouraged the belief that more spending on tourism and thus bigger budgets for the DMOs will produce more visitors has been strengthened by studies of cases belonging to the time frame found in Quadrant II. In fact, studies are more likely to be commissioned for such periods. With the increasing importance of tourism, people seek to demonstrate the role of DMO budgets and to show how better to manage and market them.

Figure 3: DMO budget and number/growth of visitors - All possible cases

more budget	IV	III
small/ no budget	I	II
	few/ less visitors	more visitors

source: own illustration.

It is notable that there are sufficient examples of all four cases and that there is therefore no scientifically robust evidence (e.g. Deskins & Seever, 2011), that these two variables are related. "Not really": In an Australian study that examined whether more marketing expenditures generated higher numbers of visitors, the authors were obliged to acknowledge a limitation in the study (Crouch, Schultz, & Valerio, 1992). Crouch et al. argued that the significant correlation allowed not only a causality in one direction, such that "the higher the budget, the more visitors," but also permitted an inverse causality, such that "the more visitors, the higher the budget." The latter is at least as plausible as the former. This inverse causality actually reflects immediate and more easily comprehensible mechanisms. As tourism figures rise, it will be easier to lobby for more funds for the benefit of the industry. In many other cases there is even a fiscal automatism, e.g. turnover or overnight-based taxes. Some of these mechanisms are also partially enshrined in law. Thus, at a given visitor's tax

rate, the budget of the DMO increases continuously, as long as more visitors arrive. This leads the DMO to market more actively in good times and to look less critically at the impact of the funds used. What is unfortunately increasingly happening in various Alpine destinations is case IV, where declining visitor numbers are causing a drop in visitor taxes. The shortfall has to be made up for by tapping other sources of funding in order "to remain competitive," i.e. spending more on communication.

Myth 5: DMOs attract new visitors through social media and with the help of influencers.

Some DMO managers and marketers have recognized the problems detailed above. Hence, they are focusing on a new communications topic: Social media and in particular influencers. The topic of influencer marketing is not really new. In the past, opinion leaders and testimonials were also used in tourism to try to attract new visitors. If celebrities buy a product or visit a place, many others will imitate them, according to this belief.

Counterargument: The sender of the message is critical, not the channel.

Consumer influence via social networks (not just digital ones) actually exists, as shown for example in studies on imitation of cigarette smoking by adolescents (Sen & Basu, 2000), in clubs (Lee, Cotte, & Noseworthy, 2010), in neighborhoods (e.g. Yang & Allenby, 2003), and, of course, in the context of visits, for example with friends (Wheeler & Stutz, 1971). What most studies have in common, however, is that the influenced know the influencer personally and normally maintain a dialog with them. In fact, the word-of-mouth (WOM) mechanism plays a more important role than the channel itself used to send the recommendation⁵. WOM plays an especially central role in travel (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Michael, Armstrong, & King, 2004; Murphy, Moscardo, & Benckendorff, 2007; O'Leary & Morrison, 1995; Stokes, 2008). The overriding importance of word-of-mouth advertising has also been demonstrated in Switzerland with and without social media (e.g. Laesser & Bieger, 2008; Laesser & Riegler, 2012).

Clearly, WOM is becoming e-WOM via digital channels and is at least as effective in this form (e.g. Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). In the end, people still trust those they know and have a personal relationship with. Whether the contact is made in person, on the phone, or through social media is not crucial for those involved. Yet the new media seduce DMOs into developing a presence there too. But it does not quite work like that. There is no sound evidence that travelers have actually visited a destination because of a DMO's posted messages – we are not talking about bookable offers here. "It's the sender, not the channel, ...!". We should finally take this to heart when evaluating this myth.

For behavioral models not personally known, such as celebrities, the immediate, geographical proximity to the current location and events is crucial in influencing the decision to visit. Thus, a famous actor in a resort can post a current picture of himself specifying his location and hundreds of fans located within a radius of up to two hours will go there. Whether the DMO is actually responsible for this is doubtful, and whether this counts towards the DMO's goal of "bringing visitors" is an open question.

⁵ Consider that travel recommender systems do actually work, but rather for single businesses (e.g. hotel, restaurant) and in particular for visitors who are already at the place. At this point, visitors have already been attracted to the place.

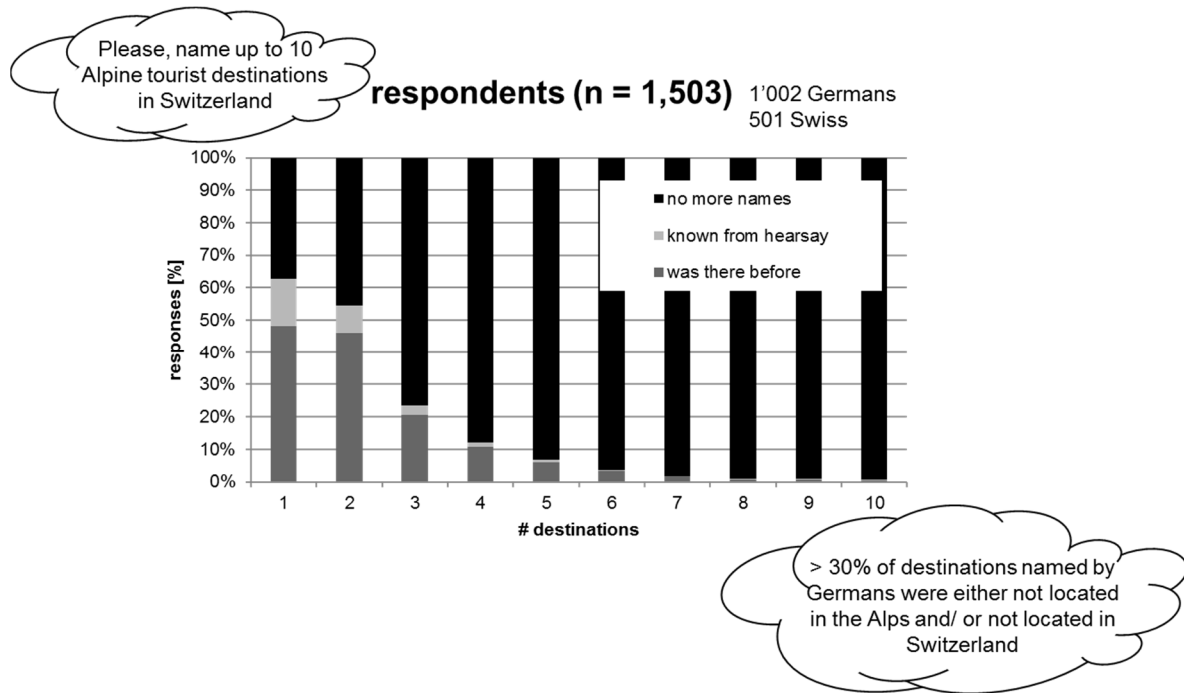
Myth 6: The higher the level of public awareness of our destination, the more visitors will come. Hence, DMOs need to increase public awareness of their destination.

«Our town/region has so many beautiful and interesting things to offer! If only the world was aware of this, we would have more visitors. All we have to do is increase the level of awareness of our town/region/country!" This logic has already induced many decision-makers to invest a great deal in communication about the DMO. The belief that engaging intensively in communication through the DMO somehow attracts greater numbers of new and returning visitors is also linked to Myths 2 and 4 in this article.

Counterargument: We are familiar with many world destinations, but we do not decide to visit on the basis of their popularity.

Actually, today everyone knows about all world destinations that are potential travel destinations. Anyone who has learned a bit of geography at school knows approximately where Hong Kong is located. If we did not know about Dubai before, we recognize it today as a magnificent holiday destination on the Arabian Peninsula as a result of media coverage of its bombastic construction projects. Travelers have also learned from friends or documentaries about the scenic beauty of Patagonia. Interestingly, we do not remember anything about the DMOs of these places or regions, probably because we never noticed them or their messages⁶. What is relevant for travel decisions is what we can actively call up (unaided awareness). An early study that we conducted showed (1) how few destinations we can mentally retrieve and (2) that we are familiar with them mainly because we were there ourselves.

⁶ Take the test. Recall past vacation spots (places, regions, countries) that you have visited. How did you know about the existence of these destinations or at least their names? Did messages or information from DMOs play a role? Then use a search engine to search for information about the corresponding DMO. In most cases the search will yield some results. In some cases, you will be amazed at what this organization has communicated and how little of it has reached you (perhaps nothing).

Figure 4: Unaided recall of Alpine destinations in Switzerland

Source: Data from a survey of the IMP-HSG, 2005.

Actually, such results should not lead to the conclusion that awareness of the destination should be increased (how is that supposed to be done?). Once again, it shows that travelers usually make simple decisions based on their personal environment and experiences. This finding also clearly contradicts the currently popular concept of the "customer journey." This suggests that in order to book and travel we first need inspiration and then have to dream, i.e. that we follow a linear controlled process. This leads us to the next myth.

Myth 7: DMOs must make sure people dream of 'their' destination. The 'inspiration' and 'dreaming' phases are an integral part of the decision-making cycle of (potential) visitors.

The AIDA marketing formula of the 1980s (A = attention, I = interest, D = desire, A = action) has a new form today. Many concepts today assume that potential visitors must first be inspired (this also presupposes a place's name recognition), in order for them to dream of it. This is followed by the trip planning phase, which is then strictly implemented. The modern version also makes allowance for guests capturing their impressions and posting them on social media ('sharing'). The new process is usually presented as a simple, direct cycle running approximately as follows: Inspiration - Dreaming - Planning - Traveling - 'Sharing' and then starting over again. The more communication the DMO engages in over the cycle, the greater the likelihood that potential visitors will be retained throughout and that the cycle can be influenced or even controlled.

Counterargument: We dream of many places we never actually visit. Travel decisions are made following a different logic than used for consumer goods.

A journey is the result of many small individual decisions. This is sometimes called a "portfolio decision." It's about where we go and stay, with whom, when, with what, etc. Planning does not really have a starting and ending point; plans are continuously made, revised or even canceled. Moreover, many decisions are further postponed because of the increasing digitization in society (DiPietro, Wang, Rompf, & Severt, 2007). Many travel decisions are also made impulsively (Laesser & Dolnicar, 2012). The inspiration and desire to visit very specific destinations stands in stark contrast to the fact that in the end we tend to go where we have been before and where our fellow travelers agree with.

We recently asked 110 people about destinations they dream of visiting but have not yet visited. Afterwards we asked why they had not yet visited. The strongest inhibitors by far were social conditions ("had no opportunity to go with ...", "do not know anyone there", "do not know anyone who could go with me"), followed by "no time" and "not enough money" (Beritelli & Reinhold, 2018). Hence, the decision hinges on exogenously determined opportunities that have to align with one's own intentions and possibilities (e.g. time, money Laesser, Luo, & Beritelli, 2019). All our lives we dream of visiting places and countries that we will probably never get to visit. On the other hand, we do visit destinations that we never dreamed of visiting. Or we may plan to visit certain destinations, in greater or lesser detail, and then have to change these plans because we cannot find the right travel deal or properly arrange the trip or because the planning process generates new ideas and suggestions that seem more appropriate⁷. In short, "dreaming" is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for a decision; there are only a few cases where both hold (the decision is congruent with the dream). Rather, there are many cases where these two domains are independent of each other. It is a somewhat naive belief that a DMO can keep the decision-makers engaged throughout these different processes, or even specifically identify new ones and lead to the final, binding reservation. At the latest, the decision maker's engagement is lost when the reservation is made, as shown in the next myth.

⁷ In marketing, this is also referred to as the 'world of identification' and the 'world of action.' These two are rarely compatible. The first is where we construct and develop emotions, images, desires, and the like in our minds, while the second is where real actions take place (Rutschmann and Belz (2014).

Myth 8: DMOs can bring many visitors to their destinations via digital distribution channels.

Just as travel agents and tour operators can provide individual travel services and sell package tours, DMOs can do the same for the visitor companies serving their destination. In the end, the first outgoing distribution and the second incoming distribution operate via the same channels (e.g. trade fairs, digital sales channels). It is assumed that DMOs can successfully broker and ultimately sell the services of their regional partners. Myth 9 deals with the issue of brokering. The following counterargument takes up the issue of DMOs' direct sales via their own channels.

Counterargument: DMOs themselves sell less than could be hoped for through digital channels. If a visitor goes on a DMO website, it is usually after he or she has made a decision and booked a reservation.

The impact of selling through DMOs' own websites has remained at a negligible level in recent years, or – if it was ever higher – has since declined. Depending on the survey and the country, 0.3-4.5% of the total booking volume for hotels is transacted via these channels (Schegg & Fux, 2013, 2014; Schegg, Stangl, Fux, & Inversini, 2013). This is not least attributable to the fact that destinations in general and their DMOs have hardly anything to sell and that in recent years not only OTAs (online travel agencies) but also the digitization of direct sales by individual tourism companies have made great leaps. In fact, company websites along with the OTAs are the most important digital sales channels for tourism services (e.g. Schegg & Fux, 2010; Schegg & Fux, 2014). It is noteworthy that expenditure on DMO-led online sales channels is not worthwhile the large majority of the time. Rather, DMOs can serve as facilitators or enablers of a sales and distribution process. The only way to generate more "sales" would be through DMOs' own (incoming) production of bundles highly tailored to specific needs⁸.

In addition, a study on information and booking processes we conducted in 2004 showed that in the majority of cases DMO channels only become important *after* the first central bookings or decisions had been made, or that they were used in advance of the reservations to obtain a general overview, but not for bookings (Bieger & Laesser, 2004).

⁸ We refer here to sales consortia, which are run, for example, by hotels and mountain railways in some Alpine destinations. Until now, this has worked mainly for volume business in undifferentiated travel (e.g. car travel, ski ticket, hotel accommodation). Further differentiated models are conceivable..

Myth 9: DMOs bring many new visitors to their destination via B2B platforms.

This myth ties in with Myth 8. Not only is a notion prevalent that DMOs can generate a significant sales volume through their own platforms. Many tourism professionals also believe that DMOs can operate successfully as intermediaries to tour operators for the services of tourism companies at 'their' destination.

Counterargument: DMOs cannot actually mediate services in B2B channels, since until now they have had no ability to influence services and prices.

Individual services such as transportation, hotel accommodation, tickets for events or for larger attractions and many more services that tourists book at home before departure are sold mainly by the providers themselves. After all, they have been most successful to date when they conduct their business directly with tour operators because they decide on the scope, quality, and price of services. By contrast, tourist companies only rarely give DMOs complete control of their capacities and price range in contracts with tour operators and travel agencies. Often, what happens is even the opposite of what DMOs want or expect: Tour operators bring visitors to a destination that was not actually part of the DMO's and its stakeholders' plan (for example, day tourists on buses or cruise liners). Thus arise forms of mass tourism (also now known as "overtourism"), which point up the gulf that exists between the wishes of DMOs and reality.

DMOs can facilitate or enable the travel offer production process, taking a perspective of visitors much like that of a tour operator. However, this presupposes that the service providers are prepared to provide capacity at the right price and the right time, and to give the DMOs far-reaching powers. The joint production of bundles of offers, presented by the DMO, for example, can help better control events at the destination and better serve its image. In particular, it can also better reduce margins from the increasingly international business of the service providers. This also shows the supporting role of the DMO, which is explained in detail in the next section

Myth 10: The impact of marketing activities (communication) cannot really be measured or proved anyway, but somehow it works.

This myth is actually a general capitulation to marketing itself. In fact, this slogan is used to hide behind when people run out of arguments to explain or justify specific actions.

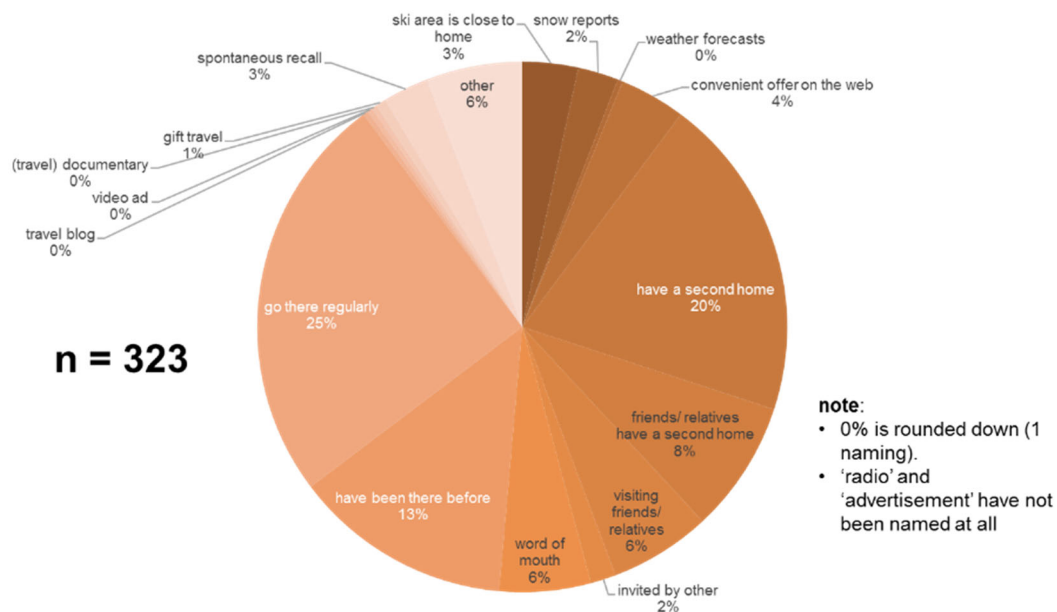
Counterargument: The mechanisms behind how visitors reach a destination decision (and other travel decisions) can certainly be measured and proven.

As discussed above, it is known that a journey results from a combination and juxtaposition of different decisions. Different decisions are made at different times (Choi, Lehto, Morrison, & Jang, 2011; Fesenmaier & Jeng, 2000; Hyde & Laesser, 2009). In general, travelers tend to postpone decisions (DiPietro et al., 2007). However, the constituent decisions for a trip such as group (with whom?), destination, time and duration, accommodation and means of transportation (Woodside & MacDonald, 1994) are still made at home. What was decisive for the decision can actually be accurately determined by posing a simple question, namely: "How come you ... right then ... decided to choose this destination?" (Beritelli, Reinhold, & Luo, 2017). It is important not to ask "why?". Otherwise, in hindsight respondents tend to explain preferences that did not really contribute to their decision. For example, they might give as a reason "to go hiking." But one can go hiking basically everywhere. The question is how did it happen that travelers ended up in just this destination to go hiking and do other activities. Thus, what is important is the circumstances and context in which decisions are made using simple rules or heuristics (Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2011). Try the question yourself using the example of your own travels⁹.

We did this in a recent study on winter holidays in the mountains, admittedly in a simplified form (Beritelli, Reinhold, & Laesser, 2017). In the process, vacationers from a representative sample were asked to identify a maximum of three of 19 possible triggers that were relevant to their travel decision. In a second step, they were asked to choose the most important one. The results for trips of three or more nights are shown in the figure below. Note that in the list we deliberately included communication channels that are popular with DMOs.

Figure 5: What was the most important trigger for your last winter vacation in the mountains? (3+ nights).

⁹ Ask yourself "How did I/we make this decision?" What triggers played a role and what made you decide on one destination instead of another?



The result clearly shows that most decisions are based on triggers due to (1) the immediate social environment (e.g., visiting acquaintances/relatives, visiting at acquaintances'/relatives' second homes, tips/recommendations) or (2) consumer inertia and habit (Gal, 2006; Thaler, 1980) (e.g. go there regularly, have been there once, requested by others, ski area very close to them, themselves have second homes there). After all, knowledge of a destination develops from one's own visits there or from specific dialogues with resource persons one feels close to who can provide reliable tips and information (see also Myth 6, Figure 4).

Hence, it is quite possible to prove how visitors make travel decisions and how they decide to visit one destination instead of another. One only needs (1) to go to the source of the information, namely to the visitors, and (2) to ask a question that directly addresses the problem.

The more we pose the question, the sooner we will realize that destinations are made by the visitors themselves as it were, or put differently, it is the interaction between us, other people, and the place that shapes visitors' experiences. The latter in turn encourages repeat visits and reinforces word-of-mouth recommendations through our social networks. These social relationships and commitments are decisive in trips to visit relatives or acquaintances, which account for about 40% of travel with business travel adding another ca. 15% (UNWTO, 2016).

Myth 11: New (organizational) structures in DMOs (mergers, acquisitions) bring new visitors to the destination.

This myth does not refer directly to the belief that "visitors are to be acquired." Still, it assumes that the more DMOs do to get visitors, the better it will be overall for tourism. Consequently, according to this thinking, bigger budgets will attract more visitors to the destination. In a situation where budget size is static, mergers of DMOs and/or their budgets are assumed to have a greater impact (Beritelli & Reinhold, 2014). What sounds attractive here is the territorial extension that goes along with mergers. It is believed that the "brand" of a region in which, for example, three "brands" of three localities are to be found must be far better known – or at least have greater potential – than the individual brands of the three places. The three places are already included in one single region, and the offer that can be advertised is much bigger. That will ultimately "get more visitors."

Counterargument: Reorganizations and mergers among DMOs at best create operational cost reductions and the financing of in-house experts. Organizational size can at best be a basis for being able to offer qualified employees career prospects.

The truth behind this myth should actually have already been uncovered in the course of the discussion thus far. We clearly state again here that geographical names are not "brands" that we can control, design, manage, let alone "lead," as with company or product names¹⁰. In the minds of travelers, places, regions and countries are either concretely linked with their own experiences or with information which stems from their immediate social surroundings. If we know the names of places and countries but lack a personal connection to them, our knowledge of them comes from general geographical knowledge or from media reporting on these areas. In the latter case, it is a commonplace that names of distant countries and their capitals or unusual places are better known than those of other cities, regions or places (Dolnicar & Grün, 2017). It is illusory to assume that the effect of daily media consumption and first-hand personal experience can be overlaid with new geographical names by a DMO that wants to draw attention to them using interchangeable images and general texts.

Looking back on more than 15 years of experience of mergers and acquisitions of DMOs, we can say that these processes have at best (1) enabled cost savings for administrative tasks or support functions (e.g. IT) and (2) the hiring of better paid employees with certain expertise, not least because such employees can also be offered better career prospects. This works especially for smaller DMOs with a few employees or, to put it another way, these benefits beyond a case-specific tipping point will decrease with increasing DMO budgets. Size only matters for employing skilled people but not with regard to communication and advertising. Probably, we did not get the full story ourselves, either, ten years ago (T Bieger, Beritelli, & Laesser, 2009). The larger the budgets, the greater the tendency to spend money on "marketing" (i.e. communication).

¹⁰ In reality, "brand management" by a DMO does not occur. There is at most the existence of corporate design manuals, which most partners sooner or later stop adhering to.

Three exceptions prove the rule

These eleven myths and their counterarguments show where the fundamental problem of DMOs is to be found. Since they do not offer and sell any primary tourist services themselves and since they normally do not operate the destinations' main attractions, they cannot normally simply "attract visitors." Exceptions to this rule show that only as a provider can DMOs have a decisive influence on the travel decision. Specifically, this takes place when a DMO

1. designs, organizes and carries out a cultural or sporting event to a large extent by itself;
2. operates a major tourist attraction itself (e.g. major museum, sports center, castle); or
3. operates another important complementary service which, alongside other service providers, provides a complementary or competitive edge (e.g. operation of a hotel specializing in a particular clientele).

Such cases are however rather rare because DMOs define themselves less through local services. After all, their main task is to "get visitors."

3 Symptoms of a «Cargo Cult»

"Get/attract visitors," "A brand is more than just a logo," "Destination branding," "Brand management," "Buzz/ Background noise," "Have a high profile/ Show presence," "New/ strong appearance." These and many other buzzwords from industry, which also, admittedly provocatively, can be described as marketing frills, refer to a phenomenon called a "cargo cult." This analogy was recently discussed in the destination management literature (Elbe, Gebert Persson, Persson-Fischier, & Lindahl, 2018). The cargo cult is often associated with religious rituals in Papua New Guinea or among Melanesian island communities. People there believed that in former times sailors and during World War II US air force troops brought valuable gifts ('wonderful cargo') from the gods. After the white people left these areas, the locals implored the gods to continue to bring cargo with the help of white men. For this they used self-made wooden artifacts (e.g. lighthouses, ships, airplanes, airstrips and towers, headphones) and rituals (e.g. simulations of radio conversations, drills with wooden rifles). In recent times, cargo cult science and management has become synonymous with elaborate, meaningless imitation of behaviors without knowing their mode of action or the underlying technology (Feynman, 1974). Well-known variations of the cargo cult include the ghost dance and the rain dance.

The similarities between a "cargo cult" and DMOs' "getting visitors," (the latter in parenthesis), are mainly the following five:

1. The locals do not understand the visitors' technology and do not care where the valuable gifts come from. (DMOs cannot really ascertain how visitors come to be in their destination).
2. Locals recognize a chief or a group of leaders who, as wizards, determine which artifacts and rituals are appropriate. (Destination managers and other experts are appointed as leaders of the destination, formulating visions and strategies and implementing the "marketing mix.")
3. The locals use artifacts and perform rituals to gain the favor of the gods so that the white men bring their gifts. (Through the use of "Destination Branding," "Appearance," "Presence," "Buzz/ Background noise" and other artifacts and rituals, more visitors are expected to come).

4. The locals go to great lengths and believe that the more they try, the richer the gods will reward them. (DMOs are very busy and need a lot of resources and money).
5. The locals do everything the way the white men did without realizing that the white men will not return with their gifts. (DMOs do everything as well as or even better than the tourist companies, but the visitors do not come because DMOs do not offer the destination's main deals or run their attractions.)

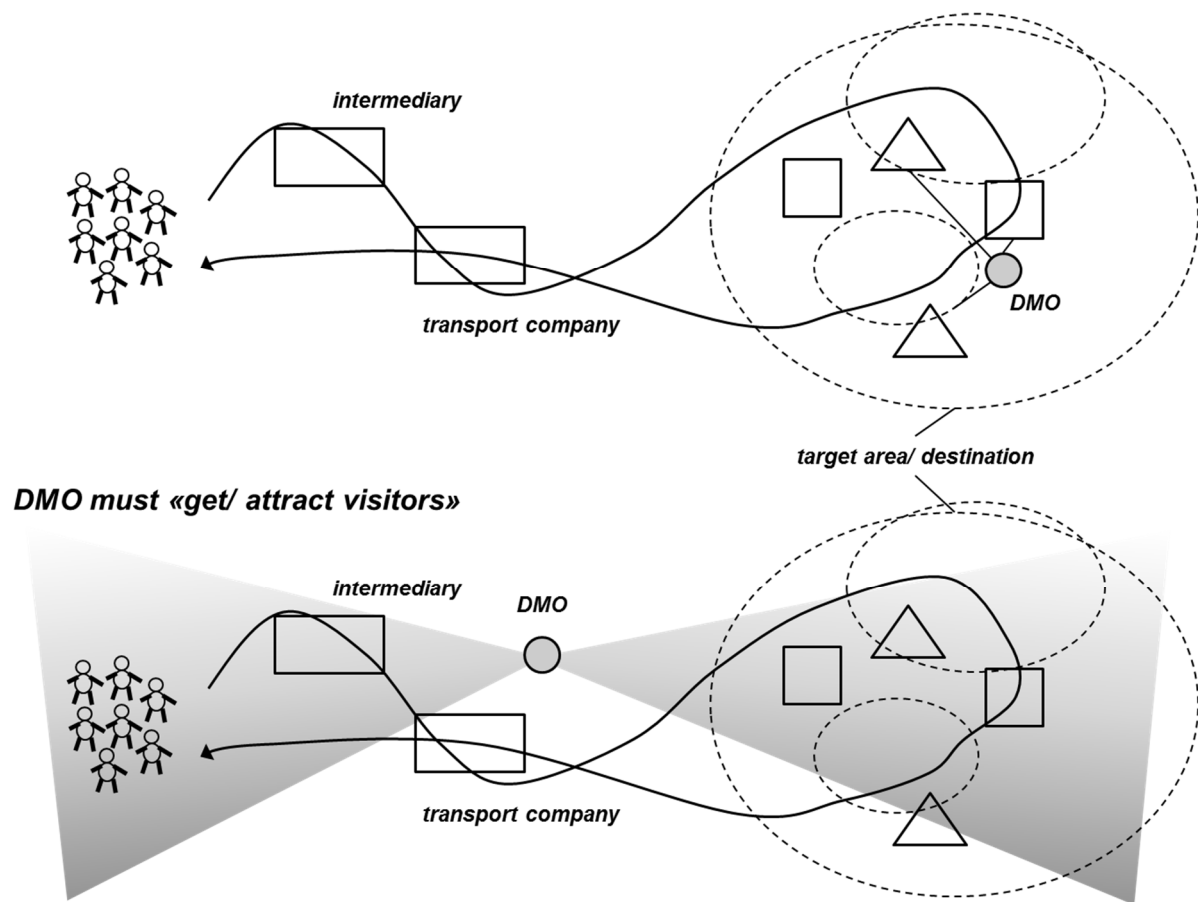
4 So what are DMOs for?

This question is justified at this point. Critical debate on the benefits of DMOs is currently going on in more than just German-speaking countries (e.g. Pike & Page, 2014). A historical review may help shed light on the matter. Modern tourism organizations emerged in the Alpine countries in the second half of the 19th Century¹¹ and appeared almost simultaneously in the countries of the British Commonwealth. At the time they were the exception. We consider them an exception because they were founded on the basis of market failure. Where communities (or in general the government) and tourism companies lacked the means and legitimacy to provide on-site services for their visitors, they organized and financed functions such as the maintenance of hiking trails, the operation of ice rinks, or information offices. Soon, these organizations also sold souvenirs, including postcards¹². A majority of these tasks directly benefited the visitors on site, while other tasks served to support the companies. Basically, however, these were always supplementary on-site services that were provided out of necessity. Pike and Page speak of DMOs as "hospitals" (2014, p. 218). This is a fitting analogy. In the end, the patient (visitor) goes to a hospital when he can no longer help himself and the referring physician (tourist enterprise/host) can no longer be of help.

The figure below, upper half, schematically shows DMOs' position until the 1950s. Incidentally, national tourism organizations such as those in Switzerland (today Switzerland Tourism) were created through private initiative. It was not until 1939 that the then "National Association for the Promotion of Travel" was taken over by the Swiss federal government and later merged with the national publicity service. Until then, its main focus was on selling rail tickets in the worldwide agency network of the Swiss Federal Railways (P. Keller, 2017). The position of the DMO in the figure shows that it focuses on the on-site problems of the visitors as well as supplementary offers or coordinating services (T Bieger, 1996) between the companies. In addition, the DMOs' role in Incoming-Operating in leisure and business tourism is limited to counseling and organizing only when the potential visitors or groups inquire directly with the DMO (i.e. an exceptional function in the case of market failure). This happens when the visitors are mentally already at the destination or have (pre-)selected it. Put more exactly, these organizations also take on supporting and advisory roles in planning and designing public spaces, provided that they also have an overview of what the visitors are doing and can assess this together with the actors in the destination (Beritelli, Reinhold, & Laesser, 2014).

¹¹ The first tourism organization known to us is the St. Moritz Visitor Association, founded in 1864.

¹² Postcards present a special image that generates meaning not only in the eyes of the visitor but also for the recipient. Selling postcards and commissioning beautiful posters creates pictorial artifacts that may mislead DMOs into thinking they can influence visitors through images they produce themselves. "Getting visitors" via images thus seems a logical conclusion.

Figure 6: Original purpose of DMO vs. "Get/ attract visitors"***DMO original scope and position***

source: own illustration

The increasing automation of the financing of DMOs via taxes and government support (Beritelli & Laesser, 2014) was both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, in good times, with increasing numbers of overnight stays and successful lobbying, a lot of money poured into the coffers of these organizations. On the other hand, this money was not only spent quickly and uncritically but had to satisfy an increasing number of stakeholder groups (Beritelli & Reinhold, 2013). The simplest logic, which legitimizes general activities that benefit everyone, is based on as much communication as possible, which is noticed primarily by the stakeholders themselves. The promise to "get visitors" makes sense to the donors and the DMOs. This works as long as everyone believes in the cult.

If DMOs are tasked with "attracting visitors" (see Figure 6, lower picture), then they are responsible for much more while lacking the ability to provide better services than the other organizations involved. At the same time, they lose their connection to their original functions, which have admittedly changed in

the meantime. The operation of an information center today is no longer comparable to that of twenty years ago, simply because of the progress made in information and communication technology, which allows visitors to inform and orient themselves more independently and to make their own decisions and even purchases (T. Bieger & Beritelli, 2018). DMOs still have a *raison d'être*. But they must return to a realistic role and find a new self-conception.

5 Outlook and closing remarks

"Back to the roots and then a leap into the future!" This is not just a fitting slogan, but a way of thinking that can allow DMOs to rediscover their own identity and legitimacy. Only thus will they be able to create genuine added value for visitors and stakeholders in the destination. The way there is uncomfortable and requires patience. But there are enough available approaches (for an overview see Beritelli & Reinhold, 2014; Reinhold, Beritelli, & Grünig, 2018). A well-founded, specific analysis of demand and an equally specific identification of problem areas can help give the DMOs a recognized place in the supply system of the destination (e.g. Beritelli et al., 2014; Beritelli et al., 2015).

Tourism remains a phenomenon in public spaces as well as an emotional distance and information business. Someone must continue to design and develop services around this phenomenon to meet needs, not only those involving relationships between visitors and service providers, but also because of travelers' mutual interactions in increasingly scarce public spaces. The latter serve as a resource for both the visitors and the locals. Benefits must therefore not only be secured or created for businesses that live directly from tourism but also for the general public.

DMOs can make a valuable contribution to increasing the value of public spaces by working to ensure that the added value and benefits of using these public spaces as a visitor resource do not dissipate but remain in the community and the supplier system, for example through forms of cooperation and appropriately designed offers. In the future, DMOs will have to invest more resources in facilitating or at least modifying the design of specific offers. Organization of their own events with an emphasis on specific forms of tourism are good examples.

It is clear that a good offer or experience – especially in times when people can communicate through social media more easily than ever – is itself perhaps the most effective form of advertising. For this reason, funding for "advertising" can be reduced. Other actors, specifically the visitors, will take over generating the "buzz/ background noise."

The complexity of destination management is increasing. Keywords in this context are progressive digitization, increasing internationalization, and demographic change. In the future, DMOs can help substantially to deal with this complexity if they resist just starting from simple standard solutions to simple problems and indulging in the cargo cult and instead critically and constructively question their role and activities in the "system destination" on a consistent basis. We hope to have contributed to this process with this admittedly somewhat polemical article, and we look forward to forthcoming discussions.

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Epilogue

The original article in German appeared at the end of February 2019 and caused a debate in both the tourism industry and in other circles (politics, media, public). We welcome the interest in our work. For us as researchers it is our job to communicate new findings, to constantly question apparent "facts" and to empirically test and critically examine opinions. Only in this way can we serve society. Because of various discussions conducted in the media, we feel obliged to provide a few supplementary points that will hopefully support a well-founded and differentiated debate in the future. It is also important for us to clear up misunderstandings and to provide more clarity. Here are the most important points and caveats:

The article was written primarily for representatives of the industry, for employees and managing directors of DMOs, their consultants, as well as for representatives of tourism companies, lecturers and students in tourism. The availability of new scientific findings and increasing evidence against the notion that DMOs "get visitors" made this article possible. Secondly, we addressed DMOs' funding partners and institutions. Those include representatives of the tourism industry, who also belong to the first group and, in addition, representatives of government authorities and politicians who finance tourism organizations and who in the context of their executive committee work represent them in public. In order to address these two groups, we also chose an appropriate publication format (book chapter, not a blog or an article in a newspaper or magazine). The article is long and rich in information. It contains technical terms and mechanisms described in a detailed manner, because we strove for an in-depth technical discussion. Anyone wishing to take part in this discussion should therefore read the entire article in detail and, if necessary, exchange views on further discussions in professional circles. This is the only way to avoid misunderstandings.

A major concern we address via the analogy of the "cargo cult" is the inappropriate, inaccurate, and ambiguous use of terms by tourism professionals, the public, and academia. Terms such as "destination marketing" are ambiguous and are deliberately used to manipulate or used unconsciously, out of ignorance. In this article we have tried to name activities and concepts correctly and as clearly as possible. Hence, we speak of "advertising" and "communication." We also clarify differences between the terms "offer," "product," and "service." The technical jargon, which has been colloquially established for a long time, has increasingly led to the fogging and concealment of ideas and actions. As scholars, we must counteract this superficiality and cacophony. The clearer the ideas and the closer the concepts are to reality, the more unambiguous the language and the more respectful and decent the debate.

At the beginning of the article, we note that our arguments may sound polemical and provocative. This does not mean that we have written this article simply to provoke. We are serious about the problems and challenges presented by "getting visitors through DMOs." We have taken it seriously in the past years as well, when we talked and wrote about it in parts. In fact, we did not uncover anything new with this article. In the past, however, we noted that this rather difficult topic was not well understood – or those responsible do not want it to be understood – and therefore requires an unmistakable formulation, even if this may now come across provocatively. In other words, it was about time that someone clearly and comprehensively put this down.

When we write that "DMOs cannot get/attract visitors," we are not suggesting that these organizations make no sense or are useless. In the last two sections of the article, we focus on exceptions in which DMOs could very well attract visitors, and we show that they can play a supportive role in helping visitors and providing services for tourism suppliers. Therefore, we do not suggest throwing everything overboard. On the contrary, we implicitly stress that we seriously have to rethink the future roles and functions of these organizations.

With our contribution we focus on the misconception that tourism organizations "get visitors" directly and through their actions. A tourism organization demanding money to "get more visitors" (whatever the level) treads on black ice. It should be clear, by now, that it cannot keep such a promise. With this contribution we also want to caution the representatives of DMOs against burdening themselves with unrealistic promises and later trying to prove the impact of their actions, for instance via dubious tourism impact studies of destination marketing commissioned to consultants or research centers. The longer money is given with the expectation that the DMO will directly "get" more visitors, for example by increasing the number of arrivals, the more the credibility of these organizations and that of the entire tourism sector will further suffer.

In our article we specifically address the misconception that "DMOs get visitors." Through several approaches we show that such a mechanism does not exist or has an infinitesimal impact (exceptional cases at best). In particular, we emphasize that "communication" in general and "advertising" in particular have no effect. What we did not discuss in our contribution is the separate question of whether communication and advertising, if perceived by potential and actual visitors, is a meaningful task for DMOs. Hence, we differentiate between "travel decision because of" from "remembering advertising or communication." Whether advertising and communication is remembered by respondents is another issue and should correctly be called "image advertising". We ask readers to keep these two concepts separate. DMOs cannot "get/attract visitors" with advertising and general communication and should therefore not refer to visitor arrivals or spending when they want to prove the impact of their actions. However, they could advertise, hoping to send out an image that will be noticed. The question here remains to what aim and at what effort and price (see Myths 3, 5, 6, and 7).

We hope with these supplementary points to foster a better discussion, because as we have written in the article, we want to promote a constructive discourse.
