

# Experiential marketing and the Wild Atlantic Way: developing a framework for practitioners

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## 1. Introduction

This study argues that a new framework needs to be developed and implemented which captures the myriad aspects of the Wild Atlantic Way tourism experience. The development of such a framework provides a significant addition to both theory and practice, contributing to hospitality providers through a clear guidance for developing a relevant and focused marketing strategy, and to the theoretical field of experiential marketing.

### 1.1 Research Questions

Based on the challenges addressed in this abstract, the following questions emerge:

- How can small and medium tourism enterprises plan strategically for marketing, given their limited resources?
- Is it possible to create a framework to enable small and medium tourism enterprises to strategically market the experiential dimensions of the Wild Atlantic Way?

### 1.2 Research Aim

Building on the above problem and resultant research questions, this study aims to develop a framework to enable small and medium tourism enterprises on the Wild Atlantic Way to take a resource-based approach and plan strategically for experiential marketing. The Wild Atlantic Way Experiential Marketing Framework will comprise two dimensions: symbolic and materialistic, and four domains: emotion, cognition, sense and behaviour.

### 1.3 Research Objectives

The following objectives are posed, based on the research aim:

1. To gain a critical understanding of current theoretical knowledge which exists in the context of experiential marketing, the nature and challenges faced by SMTEs, and the development of branded driving routes such as the Wild Atlantic Way.
2. To critically evaluate perceptions and experiences of SMTEs of strategically planning in terms of experiential marketing, in the context of limited resources.
3. To triangulate the theoretical knowledge acquired from Objective 1 with the practical knowledge gained from Objective 2 in order to develop a framework for experiential marketing for SMTEs on the Wild Atlantic Way.
4. To appraise the validity of this framework by means of qualitative research.

### 1.4 Justification for Research

Tourism is one of Ireland's most important economic sectors. According to a report published by the Dept of Transport, Tourism and Sport in 2019, latest figures indicate that the industry is worth €9.4 billion to the economy. It has been of particular economic importance in the West of Ireland, where it is a major source of employment both directly in the accommodation and food services sector, and indirectly through retail, transport and other services. In order to ameliorate a decline in tourism numbers, a report by ITIC (2015) recommended the development of "a branded and well interpreted 'Atlantic Coast Drive' to encourage exploration of points of scenic and cultural interest" (ITIC, 2015, p1). This recommendation has since come to fruition under the guidance of Fáilte Ireland, Ireland's National Tourism Development Authority and Local Authority bodies in the region. The Wild Atlantic Way is a 2500 km branded driving route, which runs along the Atlantic coast from the tip of Donegal in the north to Cork in south of Ireland. Fyall et al. (2016) describe the Wild

Atlantic Way as “a perfect and timely example” of governmental efforts to use branded driving routes as a tourism strategy. They outline the benefits of such policies as the development of peripheral tourism destinations, connecting fragmented communities and injecting economic benefits into local areas. In order that the route to be more than simply a branding exercise, it is essential that local providers embrace its philosophy. A unified marketing strategy amongst suppliers on the Wild Atlantic Way may be desirable. However, the fragmented nature of hospitality products in the region, which are typically micro industries embedded in the local community, could prove problematic when striving to achieve this. Clearly such businesses face greater challenges than their larger counterparts when striving to achieve marketing goals.

An added dimension to the marketing discipline for these businesses is the strong experiential nature of the Wild Atlantic Way brand. Fáilte Ireland describes the Wild Atlantic Way as ‘both an experience and a destination’, with the essence of the brand being ‘wild’, offering emotional benefits to the visitors of ‘renewal, memories, liberation, freedom, excitement, oneness’. (Fáilte Ireland, 2015). It can be argued that the concept of experiential marketing, which strategises marketing methods encapsulating those sensory dimensions, has an essential role to play here.

In summary small and medium tourism enterprises on the Wild Atlantic Way face two significant challenges. Firstly, they lack the resources available to larger organisations to develop effective marketing strategies. Secondly, despite the overarching experiential dimensions of the Wild Atlantic Way tourism product, there currently exists no applicable framework that can provide a means to develop an experiential marketing strategy for these businesses. This research project addresses these two issues by aiming to develop a framework for experiential marketing which addresses the strategic marketing needs of SMTEs on this driving route.

## 2. Literature Review

The concept of an experiential view of consumption was first introduced by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982). Focusing on the symbolic, hedonic and esthetic nature of consumption, they regard consumption as ‘a phenomenon directed toward the pursuit of fantasies, feelings and fun’. Pine and Gilmore (1998) developed this notion further, espousing the idea of an experience economy, where businesses must shift from selling services to selling experiences. Their framework for experiential marketing describes four realms; entertainment, educational, escapism and the esthetic, in the context of two dimensions: participation and connection or environmental relationship. Pine and Gilmore describe strategies for experientially marketing tourism and hospitality, including the use of cohesive themes and positive cues as ‘take-aways’. Schmitt (1999) delineates five dimensions of customer experience: cognitive, affective, sensory, behavioural and social and argues that the ultimate goal of experiential marketing is to create holistic experiences from individual consumers to form a holistic gestalt. Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) constructed and tested a brand experience scale in a similar manner to Schmitt (1999) using four dimensions: sensory, affective, intellectual and behavioural. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) describe the above as among the major accepted concepts in the extant literature. The various systems of classifications used by the above authors, all contain similarities, which may be summed up as: emotion/affective, cognition/intellect, sensory, and physical/behavioural. As much of these frameworks are conceptual in nature, it can be argued that adapting such a framework to SMTEs along the Wild Atlantic Way would contribute both to a greater academic understanding in this field, and to SMTEs in developing effective strategic marketing planning.

In terms of marketing expertise, SMTEs are hampered by limited resources of time, skills and finances (Gilmore, Carson and Grant, 2001). There is some agreement that traditional forms of this discipline may not be appropriate or even feasible for SMTEs, given these factors. However the significance of these organisations in the success of the tourism industry cannot be underestimated, thus it is clear that their survival and growth must be seen as being of critical importance within tourism policy.

In conclusion, current theoretical perspectives on experiential marketing, whilst clearly outlining concepts which may be of benefit to the hospitality provider, are conceptual rather than practical in nature. Secondly, the nature of SMTEs who comprise generalists rather than specialists, and lack resources of finance and time, has implications for their ability to market strategically. The experiential

dimensions of the Wild Atlantic Way are an intrinsic part of this tourism product, and can create invaluable opportunities for the hospitality provider, if they are marketed effectively. Thus the potential exists to develop a framework for experiential marketing which will be directly applicable to practitioners in this field, overcoming deficits of key resources which may exist

### 3. Research Methods

Having studied the various research designs available, it has been decided that an explanatory mixed methods approach will be used, in the context of a pragmatic research philosophy. Stage One will consist of an internet mediated exploratory questionnaire, from a probability sample based on hospitality providers on the Wild Atlantic Way. Data analysis from this stage will be used in a multiple embedded case study strategic approach in Stage Two, where semi-structured interviews will be carried out with selected respondents. Theory and research analysis will be triangulated to form a framework for experiential marketing on the Wild Atlantic Way. This framework will be validated by means of follow up qualitative research.

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