



Medical and Wellness Tourism: Opportunities and Challenges-Marketing 'Brand India'

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Abstract

Travel and tourism is the largest service industry in India and the second highest foreign exchange earner, accounting for nearly nine percent of the total employment in the country. A significant and increasingly upcoming segment of this is the multi-billion dollar medical and wellness tourism industry which has recorded remarkable growth in the recent years. Several features such as cost-effective and advanced healthcare systems, availability of specialized and skilled healthcare professionals, and increasing popularity of traditional healing systems and alternative medicine, have all positioned India as a favorable destination for wellness and health care in the global scenario. However, India enjoys less than two percent share of the global wellness market. This calls for drawing attention of all concerned to explore the opportunities and address the existing challenges facing the industry. This article is an attempt to unravel the issues and prospects of medical and wellness industry in the country and to outline strategies for marketing 'Brand India' as the ideal destination for medical and wellness tourism.

Keywords: Medical and wellness tourism, opportunities and challenges, destination marketing, Brand India, strategies.

Introduction

Over the years tourism has evolved into a global business contributing around nine and eight percent respectively to the world GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and employment. With the number of international tourist arrivals expected to rise from one billion in 2012 to 1.8 billion in 2030, countries worldwide are increasingly focusing on tourism as a developmental strategy¹. Of the various categories of tourism, what is more interesting and becoming increasingly popular is the medical and wellness segment.

As defined by Goodrich and Goodrich medical tourism is "the attempt on the part of a tourist facility or destination to attract tourists by deliberately promoting its healthcare services and facilities, in addition to its regular tourist amenities." International medical tourism refers to cross-border travel made by people for medical facilities either to leverage costs back home or to avail quality treatment from medically advanced nations². Wellness tourism is a field of healthcare focused on improving everyday health and state of wellbeing, rather than treating a disease or curing illness (table-1)³. Medical tourism¹-an integration of medical pathology and surgery as well as wellness services, is a relatively new segment with a market potential estimated at US\$100 billion-150 billion with the scale of growing into a global market⁴.

Research Methodology

It is clear that medical and wellness tourism is the buzz term across various countries trying to convert it into a vehicle to

attract larger number of foreign tourists and thereby fuel their economic growth. India, naturally endowed with a rich cultural heritage, tourism potential and reputation for age-old medicines and therapies such as ayurveda, homoeopathy, unani, naturopathy, and yoga, is a haven for wellness tourism. However, in terms of market share the country enjoys a meager two percent of the global wellness market which evidently points at the underutilization of the potential and wellness quotient that India treasures. Fortunately, with regard to medical tourism, India has been successful to a large extent in positioning itself as a viable destination for cost-effective and qualitative advanced healthcare.

However, one must not forget the keenness and speed with which countries such as South Africa, China, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia are accentuating their medical facilities and strategizing rapidly to garner larger market shares and revenues⁵. Therefore, it is pertinent for India to rethink the marketing plans on medical and wellness tourism in terms of the services offered in the country. What is also very crucial is how the country is positioned to the world as a unique destination.

Literature on comprehensive studies is limited⁶ and the existing studies on medical tourism highlight the present scenario and the marketing strategies required⁷. But clearly there is dearth of literature combining both modern and traditional healthcare systems. Moreover studies aimed at branding India and marketing it as a destination for medical and wellness tourism are clearly invisible. This research paper attempts to do just that.

Table-1
Dimensions of Wellness Tourism

Tourist motivation	Typical activity/location
Medical/cosmetic	Hospitals, clinics
Corporeal/physical	Spas, massage, yoga
Escapism and relaxation	Beaches, spas, mountains
Hedonistic/experiential	Festival spaces
Existential/psychological	Holistic centers focused on self-development and philosophical contemplation
Spiritual	Pilgrimage, new age events, yoga retreats
Community-oriented	Voluntary work, charity treks

This paper presents an exploratory study involving qualitative research. The scope of the study is restricted to international medical tourism alone. Content analysis technique has been employed to identify research issues pertaining to medical tourism in India. In this regard, views of reputed cardiologists and surgeons of Apollo and Fortis Hospitals (Bengaluru), Apollo Hospitals (Hyderabad), tour operators, managers of slimming centers, and ayurveda spas in Hyderabad and Visakhapatnam were collected. The rationale of selecting the mentioned cities lies in the fact that both Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh are leading Indian States for medical tourism⁸. The suggestions made by respondents are presented in the paper. Finally, the objectives of this research paper are to: i. Trace the evolution and growth of medical and wellness tourism and understand its significance on host economies; ii. Review the state of medical and wellness tourism in India and the opportunities and challenges facing the country; iii. Lay down steps for systematically creating ‘Brand India’ in promoting medical and wellness tourism; and iv. Devise strategies to market India as the destination for medical and wellness tourism.

Evolution, growth and significance of medical and wellness tourism: Wellness evolved as early as 4200 BC when the Sumerians recuperated their health by bathing in thermal springs and fountains located in temples; medical care can be dated back to 1500 BC with the Greeks laying a foundation stone in a temple in honor of their God of Medicine. Ever since, history has evidence of man travelling out of his country to avail himself of suitable medical treatment. Currently more than 50 countries are engaged in medical tourism with developing nations from Asia, Latin America and South Africa capturing a major segment⁹.

The reasons for growth in medical and wellness tourism stem from the following: One, high levels of uninsured population (as in the case of USA); two, lack of private participation and high waiting times (as in UK); three, pressures of aging population and over- hospital stay (as in Japan); four, dearth of sufficient and cost-effective healthcare facilities across various parts of the world; five, elective surgery with privacy (such as Botox treatment, rhino plasty, liposuction, etc); and six, inefficient healthcare systems in developing and underdeveloped world.

In addition to the primary factors mentioned above, certain secondary factors have influenced the growth in medical and wellness tourism as well: secular shifts across the developed and developing world (such as working versus leisure time, population pyramid, individualization, increasing demand regarding quality, etc.) have led to modified leisure and tourism behavior¹⁰. Moreover, socio-economic factors such as flexible working times, higher incomes, more leisure time and the changing value of holidays (now seen as a part of life) have also resulted in new and changed lifestyles. Having identified the growing potential of medical and wellness segments, several medical tourism companies/facilitators promising end-to-end medical tourism services have sprung up across the globe. They have strategically identified medical needs and mapped them with expert medical care services from various country destinations (table-2)

Inarguably medical tourism is an economic tool for nations striving to boost their economies through direct benefits such as increase in revenue, employment opportunities, investment in tourism avenues etc and indirect benefits that include spillover effects leading to growth in other industries. Though the benefits may apparently be micro-faced, the ripple effect is capable of touching innumerable spheres in the economy, namely, rise in living standards of people associated with tourism, need for education, demand for related educational courses, growth of ancillary industries, and so on.

Medical and Wellness Tourism in India: Opportunities and Challenges: Of late the Indian medical and wellness tourism sector has been witnessing remarkable growth. Based on surveys conducted by Assocham (The Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India) and NSSO (National Sample Survey Organization), the market size is likely to more than double from Rs 4500 crore in 2011 to Rs 10,500 crore (US\$2 billion) by 2015; the inflow of medical tourists which stood at 3 lakhs in 2009 rose to 8.5 lakhs in 2011 and is likely to touch 32 lakhs by 2015¹¹.

The country is attracting an ever-increasing number of tourists predominantly from the Middle East, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Turkey, Europe and the USA. The States that are fast emerging as India’s best medical tourism

centers are Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and New Delhi. The medical services in India that attract international attention predominantly include dental and eye care treatment, orthopedics and trauma, cardiac care including surgery, urology, neurosurgery, plastic and cosmetic surgery, laparoscopic surgery, gastroenterology, kidney transplant and knee/hip surgeries¹².

The alternative medicine services available in India namely unani, ayurveda, homoeopathy, naturopathy and wellness services including yoga and meditation are increasingly becoming popular among foreign patients as non-surgical treatment for various ailments. Kerala for ayurveda and Kairali massage, Uttarakhand for yoga and meditation, Goa for holistic living, Rajasthan for spas and heritage living, are some of the world-renowned places in India for alternative medicine¹³. Furthermore, the country is also renowned for its unique travel experiences on an emotional, intellectual and spiritual level. Thus the key competitive advantages (strengths) of India in medical tourism arise from the following: i. Doctors and nurses with work experience from USA and Europe, ii. Strong reputation in advanced healthcare segments, iii. English fluency of the medical team, iv. Top-of-the-line medical and diagnostic equipment from international conglomerates across many hospitals in India, v. Indian nurses among the best in the world, vi. World-class yet affordable treatment, vii. Diversity of tourist destinations available in the country.

However, the country is apparently facing tough competition from active promoter nations of healthcare tourism (Table-3). Having realized this, the Ministry of Tourism has taken initiatives to position India as a unique destination through:

dedicated exhibition space for medical tourism in ITBs (International Travel Exhibitions), road shows, publicity material, and fiscal incentives to medical tourism operators/facilitators. Nevertheless, India still needs to travel a long mile to harness these opportunities and equip itself to address the strategic challenges that include: poor brand perception of India, shortage of qualified workforce, and delays and inefficiencies due to inadequate legal and regulatory infrastructure. Poor services in power, water, and road and rail connectivity, lack of hygiene awareness and bureaucratic support, and absence of tourist-friendly approach are some of the critical operational issues facing the industry. Overall, the biggest challenge is the lack of government vision and clear-cut futuristic policies with regard to the medical tourism industry. In view of this it becomes essential to follow a unified approach in building 'Brand India' and marketing it as a unique destination in the international market of medical and wellness tourism.

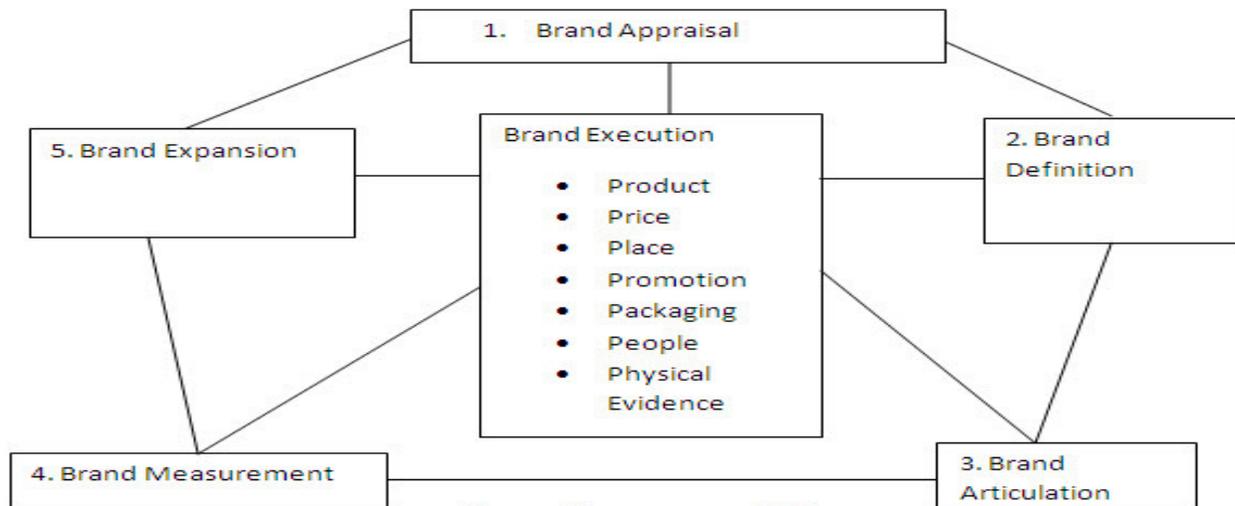
Building 'Brand India': A unique destination for medical and wellness needs: With the array of healthcare services that are available in India and its other strengths vis-à-vis competitor countries (table-3), India undoubtedly has enormous potential for developing into a unique destination brand for medical and wellness tourism. The term 'destination branding' gained visibility around the year 1998¹⁴ and has eventually become a buzz word today. Of late, countries such as Thailand, China, Singapore, Malaysia and United Arab Emirates have carved a niche and positioned themselves as medical tourism destinations. Moreover, there is also evidence of branding India for other platforms, for instance, the Indian Ministry of Commerce created the 'India Brand Equity Fund' to provide support to exporters to promote the India Inc. label.

Table-2
Medical and Wellness services available in the international market

Type of surgery	Country destinations
Orthopedic, Cardiac, Dental, Eye, obesity, spinal, LASIK, ENT, Ophthalmology, Cancer, Fertility, General, etc.	Taiwan, Thailand, India, Singapore, Turkey, Mexico, Costa Rica, Panama, Argentina, Brazil, El Salvador, Malaysia, Mexico, South Africa, Belgium, South Korea

Table-3
India's stance in the international market of medical and wellness tourism

	Wellness tourism	Alternative systems of medicine	Cosmetic surgery	Advanced and life savings healthcare
Services offered	Spas, stress relief, rejuvenation centers	Ayurveda, siddha treatment for arthritis, rheumatism	Dental care, plastic surgery, breast enhancement, tummy reduction, skin treatment	Open transplants, cardio vascular surgery, eye treatment, hip and knee replacement, In-vitro fertilization
Profit margin	Low	Low	Medium	High
Key competitors	Thailand, South Africa	Nil	South Africa, Cuba, Thailand	Singapore, Taiwan, Jordan, Thailand
India's strength	Low- Thailand has captured a significant share of the market	High- Kerala is popular for this service	Low- South Africa and Thailand lead in plastic surgery	High- India has strong image on medical tourism



(Source: Parameswaran, 2006)

Figure-1
Brand Building Pentagon

On similar lines ‘Brand India’ can be marketed for export of medical and wellness tourism services. This basically warrants a relook at the approach towards the industry and the marketing strategies to be adopted. For India to become a unique destination for medical and wellness needs, primarily it is imperative to build ‘Brand India’ through the five stages of ‘Brand Building Pentagon’ (figure-1) given below:

Stage One: Brand Appraisal: This stage is about exploring the various healthcare opportunities for branding India as a unique destination. This stage requires accomplishment of five activities in order to build up a complete picture of the brand potential the country possesses.

Market Analysis: involves an understanding of international healthcare market in terms of its size, growth prospects, market segments, geographic differences and distribution issues.

Competition Analysis: it warrants a thorough analysis of the key players operating in the international market and those playing a complementary or supplementary role; for instance Thailand for plastic surgeries and wellness, Malaysia for medical care and so on (see table-3).

Consumer analysis: involves a closer look at the consumers’ buying behavior and influencing factors. E.g. People from West Asia and Europe have varied buying behaviors.

Competency analysis: requires a dispassionate look at the skills and knowledge within the nation covering strengths in medical technology, R and D, production, selling, and distribution.

Socio-economic analysis: involves operational environmental analysis, comprising societal changes, global trends, and macroeconomic implications. Indian economy and Indians are

undergoing a sea change and this has to be acknowledged during tourism planning.

Stage Two: Brand Definition: It is about developing a description regarding what is on offer. How will it be positioned in the consumers’ minds? What will be the brand personality? This stage comprises the following four activities:

Brand reasons: Why should the consumers choose India for their treatment? The reasons could be: treatment is expensive, unavailable, or high waiting time in home country.

Brand positioning: involves identifying gaps existing in the market and locating ‘Brand India’ in the consumers’ minds. Creative advertising campaigns would be helpful in promoting the image.

Brand mapping: What are the attributes that ‘Brand India’ stands for? The issues of launch and growth stages need to be articulated.

Brand image: involves measuring ‘Brand India’s’ scores on specific attributes, tourists of which socio-economic profile and geographical regions are visiting India for seeking healthcare services, the benefits they expect and so on, and the future image desired.

Stage Three: Brand Articulation: It explores the various facts by which a brand presents itself to the consumers, how it articulates its offer, and how it connects. This stage in turn is split into three steps:

Brand Identity: requires providing an identity to ‘Brand India’ with the help of innovative logos, ancient stories and mystic aura of the country and so on.

Brand Communication: involves various promotional elements to be employed in communicating 'Brand India' to the target consumers. A brand brief has to be formulated addressing questions such as- who is the target consumer (demographics, psychographics). What is the consumer's current disposition (beliefs and attitudes about the product category and brand)? What does India offer that is different from other competitor countries? What should the tone and manner of the communication be (sophisticated, simple, friendly, aggressive, etc.)?

Brand service: deals with how the country must go beyond its physical presence and connect with the consumer. This calls for complete coordination with vertical and horizontal partners (hospitals, spas, hotels, facilitators, transportation systems etc.) in offering the service.

Stage Four: Brand Measurement: The task is not just to create and launch 'Brand India' but to track the brand in real market conditions and ensure that it succeeds. The following metrics must be measured on a monthly, quarterly, and annual basis: Sales, market share, consumer loyalty, healthcare pricing etc.

Stage Five: Brand Execution: Insight-1: Current marketing practices: i. End-to-end solutions promised by medical tourism facilitators to foreign patients through user-friendly websites. ii. Expert doctor visits are arranged by facilitators to potential target market countries, for instance, 'Forerunners Healthcare' has scheduled a visit by medical experts to Nigeria, Ghana and Cameroon in November, 2012. iii. Facilitators also provide list of associate hospitals which include the best hospitals across major cities in India, such as, Apollo, Fortis, Lilavati, Jaslok, Breach Candy, Hiranandani etc. iv. Hospitals such as Apollo and Fortis have set up exclusive marketing departments for medical tourism. v. Ministry of Tourism initiatives.

The various healthcare services offered in the country must be clearly and consistently communicated through significant communication channels in the potential country markets (albeit, in different popular languages) and connect it to in-house marketing. Heavy reliance on web-based interactive marketing is helpful in spreading awareness and promotion of services in various convenient locations.

Marketing 'Brand India': Recommendations: Rising demand for medical tourism has led to development of innovative facilities in the sector ranging from providing information about the treatment facilities and consultation, to arranging patient's travel, accommodation, surgery schedules and also a vacation. However, all the efforts made by individual entities are disintegrated (Insight-1). What essentially needs to be adopted is a brand building exercise followed by aggressive marketing strategies implemented in the true sense.

Therefore, after building 'Brand India' the following strategies may be adopted to market the country in the international market for medical and wellness tourism:

A unified and coordinated effort by the Central and State Governments, tourism departments, and facilitators is essential. India could emulate the practice of tourism-centric countries which set up DMOs (Destination Management Organizations). DMOs in India may include medical tourism facilitators, transport organizations, hospitals and wellness clinics, government bodies etc. They are required to impart training to their first-line personnel so as to address operational issues confronting the medical tourists. i. The State Governments may rope in various Embassies and High Commissions to get support of Health Ministries in foreign countries and promote medical tourism aggressively, suggests a cardiologist from Apollo Hospitals, Hyderabad. ii. According to a tourism operator from Bangalore, both Central and State Governments need to play a key role in setting up 'Multi-Specialty Health Cities' that have been proposed on a public-private partnership basis by the Ministry of Tourism at 10 centers across the country, albeit in eco-friendly atmosphere with highly trained English speaking health care professionals at affordable prices. iii. A cardio specialist from Fortis Hospitals, Bangalore opines that expanding the medical tourism base would be instrumental in encouraging reverse brain drain as several NRI (Non-resident Indian) doctors would be encouraged to return and explore these opportunities. iv. Although the medical costs of complex surgeries in India are one-tenth of those in western countries¹⁵, a periodic review of medical pricing in other competitor countries such as Malaysia, Thailand and China is to be done. v. GOI should also consider promoting FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) in building medical infrastructure. A similar exercise is being undertaken by the Government of Kerala. The State is organizing a conference on 'Emerging Kerala' to attract investors from the Gulf region by promising investor-friendly policies and administration. vi. Slimming centre and spa operators in Visakhapatnam perceive that medical tourism is not only about treating the sick. India can thus be marketed as the ideal destination for kick starting a lifestyle change with alternative therapies available such as yoga and meditation training that India is world-renowned for. vii. Ongoing efforts in building physical and financial infrastructure, maintaining environmental and hospital hygiene and a strong political will are the critical essentials to develop the Indian medical tourism industry. In this direction, the State Governments should provide financial and fiscal incentives to the healthcare industry which is capable of creating large number of jobs and earning foreign exchange. viii. A well-connected, well-facilitated, and clean nation will enhance the image value of 'Brand India'. The synergy of Indian Railways and Tourism Ministry to promote tourism in India under the campaign 'Clean India', if effectively carried out, will facilitate in branding the country as a major tourist destination in the international market.

Conclusion

In order for marketing India as a unique destination for medical and wellness tourism, primarily it is important to identify the macro and micro issues facing the industry. It is essential for the Central and State Tourism Boards to coordinate and collaborate

on a set of international standards. It is a unanimous opinion of all the experts and facilitators interviewed that it is high time the authorities attached significance to this issue. Loopholes in the administrative system and process of tourism services demand immediate attention. At a micro-level, the municipal administration departments need to understand the positive implications of medical tourism on the country's economy at large and act accordingly. Enhancement of physical infrastructure in the country seemed to be another unanimous recommendation made by all the respondents from Hyderabad and Bangalore to connect the potentiality with the demand.

Thus, the authorities are required to chalk out an effective marketing exercise in branding the country as well as executing marketing strategies in expanding the medical and wellness tourism market in the country. A national advertising campaign about 'Brand India' and its national standards could also be advertised both domestically and internationally. Eventually, the branding and marketing exercise will attract a larger number of medical tourists to the country, but what is essential and imminent is delivering the communicated promise and this is possible only with the integrated efforts of all involved with the industry.

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