E-Tourism Strategies

Endorsing Digitally Enhanced Palestinian Tourism Strategies

**JERUSALEM
HIGH-TECH FOUNDRY**

By Eyad Al Araj

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the Palestinian tourism sector, and if the situation persists much longer, Palestinian businesses will find it challenging to restore tourism activities. At the same time, it is anticipated that the global tourism industry will become more reliant on digital platforms and interactive tools for both efficiency and promotion.

Thus, it is urgent that the Palestinian tourism businesses not only develop their tourism product offering but also adapt to new conditions and rearrange promotional strategies to be ready once tourism is reactivated in the wake of the COVID-19 shutdown situation. Such adjustments are vital so that tourism businesses will be able to survive in the new-normal era. Strategic approaches will involve adopting the digital technologies to provide alternative solutions to the situation leveraging new promotional tools for digital tourism and including the use of virtual and augmented reality technology (VR/AR) in tourism-related activities. This requires the utilization of digital marketing techniques and digital mediums that specialize in specific areas such as social media networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and others), search engines, online platforms (e.g., Expedia, TripAdvisor, etc.), digital platforms (e.g., Airbnb, CouchSurfing, Uber, etc), or mobile applications, which have become strategic influential tools for any enterprise or company that wants to reach its customers more effectively and directly, and increase customers' ability to make the information more straightforward and quicker.

The Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (MoTA), local municipalities, technology companies, and the private sector play an important role in the digital transformation of tourism business models. They must rethink how we do business, introduce innovation, and integrate Palestinian tourism businesses into the global tourism value chains and the broader tourism ecosystem. The involved stakeholders should work on a mix of short- and long-term initiatives that increase the digital technology uptake for existing traditional tourism enterprises. Simultaneously, we must encourage the establishment of new ventures and solutions by reducing barriers and enhancing opportunities through digitalization, and support new ways of working, new approaches to management, and new digital cultures.

Joint efforts can be framed in line with the following strategic directions: First, we must encourage Palestinian tourism businesses to adopt and invest in new digital technologies and engage to facilitate digital innovation to support existing tourism enterprises and new ventures alike. Businesses that adopt innovative business models, however, must take into consideration the complex challenges that this involves. They include building and retaining human capital and digital capacity by attracting talent, building expertise, implementing new technologies, and recognizing and exploiting the opportunities offered by converging technologies such as mobile apps, robots, VR/AR, and more. This could be boosted by increased exposure to successful cases in which digital technology promotes tourism.

Second, we must create an environment that supports and enables the digital transformation of tourism enterprises and seeks to enhance productivity and innovation. This could include enhanced networking and improved

Photo courtesy of InterTech by Marwan Hamad.

access to human resources and skills through the training of specialists. Furthermore, we must spread information that increases awareness of opportunities and benefits, facilitate the uptake of digital technologies, and strengthen the capacity to participate in new and emerging digital and business ecosystems (e-commerce).

Thus, we must develop a competitive tourism value ecosystem that enhances digital tourism businesses by collaborating with local and international technology companies and strategically build internal and external networks and relationships that facilitate the management of products, services, and customer relationships. We must enable continuous follow-up throughout the customers' journeys, which includes searching, booking, preparation, travel, arrival, and exposure to tourism product offerings such as attractions, activities, and services. Visitors must be looked after before travel, while at the destination, and via post-trip engagement.
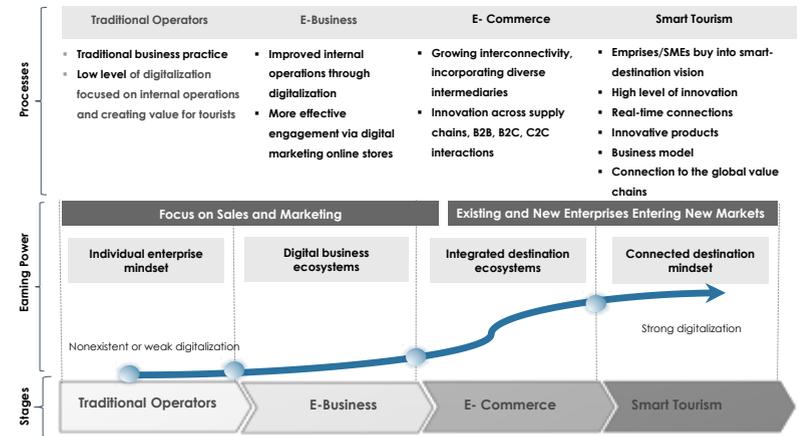
Finally, we must develop business strategies and practices that enhance competitiveness by establishing a central tourism innovation hub together with an incubator and accelerator programs that encourage developing innovative solutions and smart growth and the creation of new tourism services and products, with a focus on developing new functions, processes, and business models through the innovative use of digital technologies to enhance both tourism enterprises and destinations. This hub should serve as an interface between traditional tourism enterprises and the technology sector. Its focus should be on increasing the Palestinian tourism offer (attractions, activities,

Digital technologies for marketing communication on social media through virtual reality and augmented realities are vital for tourism development. They provide a fertile environment for potential visitors to explore virtual representations of tourism destinations. They are intended, however, not to replace conventional tourism but to maintain tourists' interest in visiting a destination in person.

and services) specifically around currently untapped archaeological, historical, and cultural heritage sites, such as Artas, Sebastiya, or Battir. It should aim to arouse the interest of tourism offices, accommodation providers, and tourist attractions in using digitalization, and help them develop new ways of promotion and create new quality and customized products that reflect their geographical areas and increase turnover.

Short- and long-term strategic initiatives that engage in such efforts include the Jerusalem High-Tech Foundry (JHF) that is currently developing and co-organizing the

first Palestinian Tourism Innovation Summit (PTIS), planned for March 2022, which includes a tourism hackathon. The plan is to bring together actors with diverse and complementary expertise that spans technology, tourism, design, and other fields to explore new solutions to problems that are facing the tourism sector in Palestine and beyond. This event will see the emergence and prototyping of new ideas and the creation of start-ups.

Generally, we must organize awareness events that target the Palestinian tourism sector and expose successful cases of digital technology to promote tourism.

We should organize a virtual tourism festival that includes virtual tours around Palestinian historical sites, a virtual booth for local businesses, and online exhibitions that showcase a wide array of tour packages and local products. Travel

agents can designate places that run online shops or online marketplaces where visitors can buy popular local souvenirs from a destination and promote them virtually to visitors.

Eyad Al Araj, a co-founder of Jerusalem High-Tech Foundry, has a long career in international development, over 20 years of extensive senior managerial experience in the nonprofit sector, and a record of success in getting initiatives off the ground and flourishing.

The Journey Towards Digitalization

Source: *Digitalisation in Tourism, In-depth analysis of challenges and opportunities, AALBORG University, Denmark, 2018.*

The chart represents the journey from digitalizing internal tourism enterprise operations through to the development of digital supply chains and e-commerce, towards interconnected digital systems that support e-governance.

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