
UNIT 14 DISTRIBUTION CHANNELS IN TOURISM MARKETING

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14.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- explain the meaning of distribution channels;
- identify the levels of distribution channels;
- list the process involved in the distribution channel management.
- list the characteristics of distribution channels in tourism; and
- discuss the basic concept of supply chain management in tourism

14.1 INTRODUCTION

Distribution is a process of delivering the finished products to end-users by the manufacturer through different means. In a small business, the manufacturer can interact with the customer directly and negotiate the sales. While in the case of a large business and a heterogeneous market, the

manufacturer needs to use a number of intermediaries right from the place of production to the market area of sale.

In tourism industry, the production and consumption of products and services take place simultaneously and a number of factors intervene in the Tourism Marketing Process. As you recall, in Unit 2, we have discussed marketing mix and the 7P's of Tourism Marketing. The 4th P – Place in Tourism Marketing Process refers to the Distribution Channels. As discussed in earlier Distribution Channels play a vital role in reaching the desired market and make a profitable sale. At the same time Distribution Channels and its design are crucial to meet and maintain the demand of a tourism product or service. Distribution Channels has a significant role in tourism marketing and this unit enables you to understand the various levels of distribution channels in tourism as well as the role of various intermediaries in Tourism Marketing Process.

14.2 DISTRIBUTION CHANNELS

In broad meaning, Distribution Channel in marketing means, the marketing channel through which a product of a particular manufacturer reaches the customers in their place of residence and or consumption. In effect, distribution channels provide a number of options to the manufacturer to deliver the products and suggest alternative strategies to address the 'place' factor of marketing mix. According to Kotler, Bowen and Makens (2008), 'distribution system provides a steady flow of customers'. Competition, globalisation, electronic distribution and the perishable nature of tourism product signify the importance of distribution channels.

14.2.1 Definition

In the words of Kotler et al. (2008), 'distribution channel is a set of independent organisations involved in the process of making a product or service available to the consumer or business user'.

According to Shoemaker and Shaw (2008), 'distribution channel can be defined as a group of organisations, independent or not, that are involved in the process of making a product or service available for use of consumption'. The definition mentions three components.

- i) Manufacturer (Producer of product or service)
- ii) Set of organisations as intermediaries (Distribution Channel)
- iii) End user (Consumer)

A producer manufactures the product in a factory or the supplier of a service has some benefit to offer to the needy customers. The producer/supplier depends on the intermediaries to reach the consumer. The end user may be living in a different place than the place of the production, hence the

intermediary act as a link between the producer/supplier and the customer and consumer to smoothen the process.

14.2.2 Nature and Importance

A good distribution channel eases the effort of the manufacturer to reach the customer and it also ensures a smooth flow of products and services in the chain. The entire process of deciding the channel, managing the intermediaries, ensuring the inventories and making it available at the point of sale needs to be taken care of. According to Holloway (2004), there are two aspects of distribution (i) handle enquiries and sales on behalf of the supplier or principal, (ii) physical delivery of products to channel and ultimately to the customers.

Tourism products are service focused, and therefore the distinctive nature of tourism business, and the decisions of distribution channels are complex. The following diagram indicates the unique features of tourism business: -

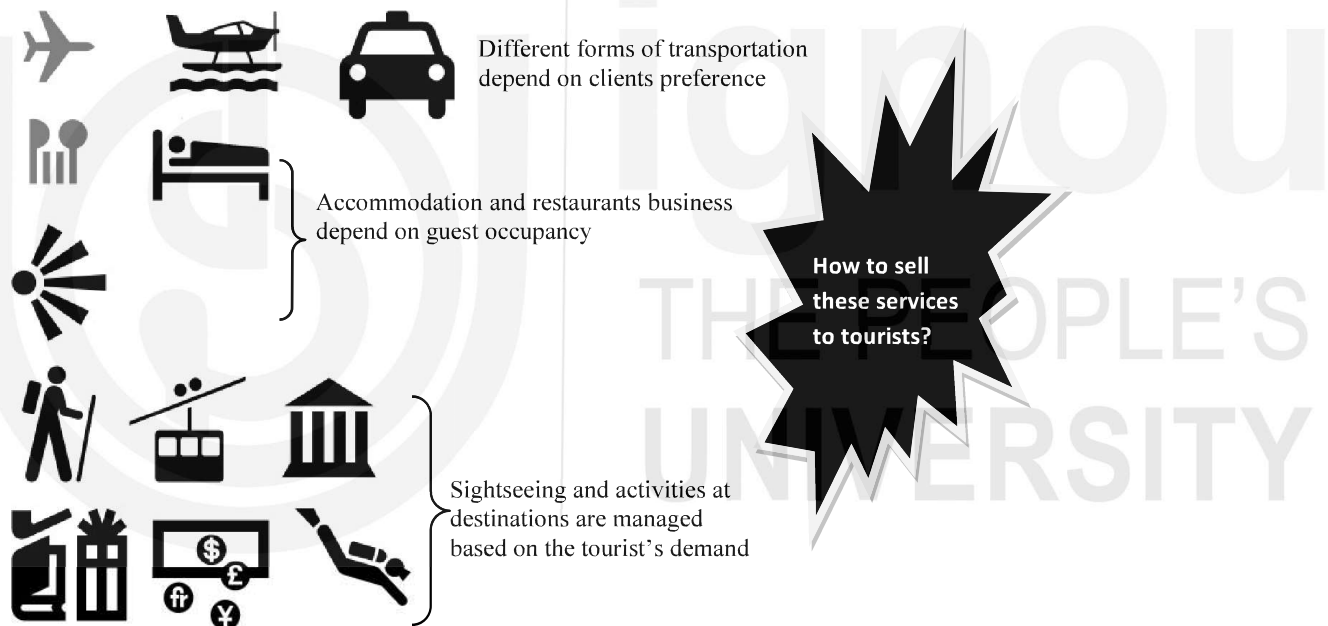


Fig.14.1: Tourism Business

Tourism business is a network of different businesses. Tourism services providers play a dual role; they are both suppliers and retailers at the same time. A hotel room can be sold to a walk - in guest or through an online portal or mobile applications such as bookings.com. The distribution channels act as primary information sources of destinations so that the tourists get to know about the attractions and activities in the destination. Some of these channels may sell many products or services while others may provide only one specific service. Here, the role of the distribution channel members is to have a general understanding about the sites, various activities possible, and the unique features of the destination. Hence, Distribution

Channel partner plays a vital role in communicating the benefits of products and services to the next member in the chain.

Internet has brought changes to the traditional process of distribution, and it enabled service providers to reach the customers directly. Start ups and new formats of business reduced the dependence on intermediaries in the service delivery process. Let us see two different side of tourism distribution with examples:-

- a) Airlines offer direct booking facilities through the mobile apps, website and through the travel agencies. International Air Transport Association (IATA) also insisted on zero-commission policy which forced travel agents to look for alternative income sources. Here, we can see that the travel agents' income depended on the services they provided and the intervention of technology and policy of IATA, changed the overall travel business scenario. The following diagram explains the distribution channel as seen in Airline Industry:

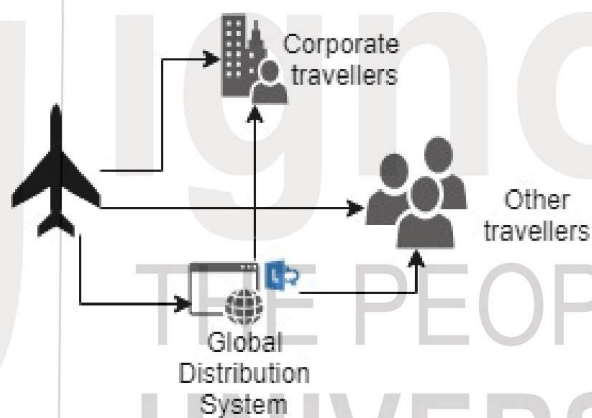


Fig. 14.2: Distribution channels of travel services

The seats of an airline can now be booked directly by the customer through (i) the offices of airline or website of the airline, or (ii) the mobile application, and (iii) book through the travel agents. Online travel agents introduced mobile apps which help customers to book tickets from mobile. Corporate travellers usually use in-house travel agents. Some companies outsource the travel services to professional travel agents. Some companies operate their own corporate travel division to make travel arrangements of their executives.

- b) Zomato, a mobile application allowed the restaurant owners to register themselves in the online platform so that customers can book food using this mobile app. It offers freedom of choosing from the menu and order food online using the app, and gets the food delivered at door step. The following diagram demonstrates a new and different pattern of distribution:

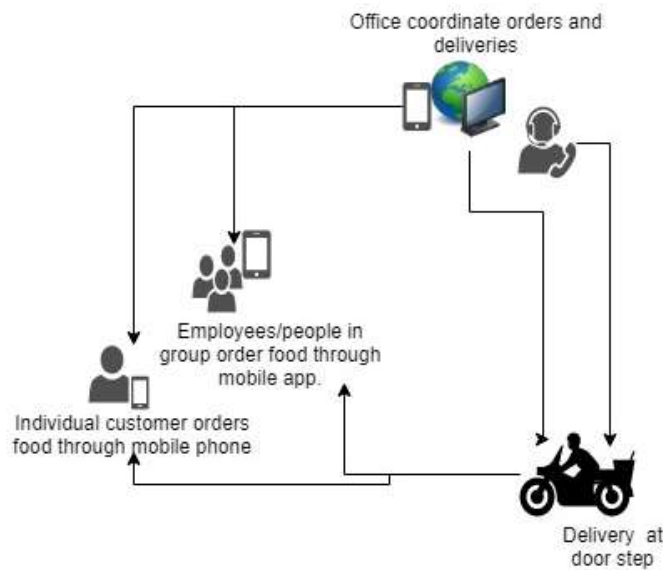


Fig. 14.3: Technology supported distribution system

In this context, the product is different, and the channels are also complex. The food order is coming through mobile application or website, and then the delivery is at the location where the order is placed. Here technology integrates the service, product and the provider of service.

In case of a start up business i.e. new business venture, we can find the following pattern of business:-



All new business ventures may or may not have an outside investor as that depends upon the size of the business operation. The process of selecting a distribution channel to reach maximum customers among the target market is same both for new ventures as well as old. The use of technology and digital platform for identifying and acting as delivery system is a part and parcel of the new age distribution channel system.

14.3 PATTERN OF DISTRIBUTION CHANNEL

The pattern of distribution channel (here it means the levels of distribution channels) in tourism depends on a number of factors such as:

- the features of the product,
- usability,
- size of business firm,
- the geographical area that the organisation wishes to reach; and
- the potential customers that the organisation wishes to targets.

It is important to study the pattern of distribution channels in order to learn the intermediaries and their role and network. Let us discuss the intermediaries in the different sectors of tourism industry one by one:-

1) Destination

A destination comprises of several tourist sites, it's a tourism product. Tourists are primarily interested in attractions (natural and cultural), events, fun-filled activities, adventurous activities, shopping, and so on. Destinations are normally managed by tourism authorities or tourism boards either government or private. These destinations use various mediums to attract visitors such as official websites, social media platforms, tourist information offices, etc. Tourism authorities also engage destination management companies, private players who have a hold over the tourism business.

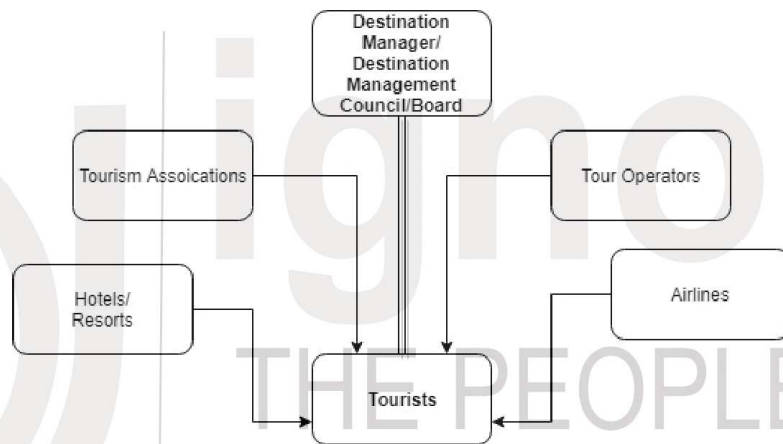


Fig. 14.4: Pattern of distribution channels of a destination management authority

The above illustration demonstrates that a destination is promoted by different stakeholders such as tour operators, airlines, hotels and resorts and tourism association in addition to the tourism promotion board of that site. The distribution process above involves a cumulative effort of all the channel members.

2) Integrated Resorts

Integrated resorts are hospitality units, which comprises of a number of tourist facilities. The resort in itself is an attraction and destination for the visitors. The resort offers accommodation, food and beverages, casino, leisure and adventure activities, shopping, cruises, wellness, etc. When a tourist buys a package of the resort, the offerings include access to all these facilities or they can customize it according to their choices. Cruise liners also follow similar practices. The following illustration demonstrates all possible channels of distribution:

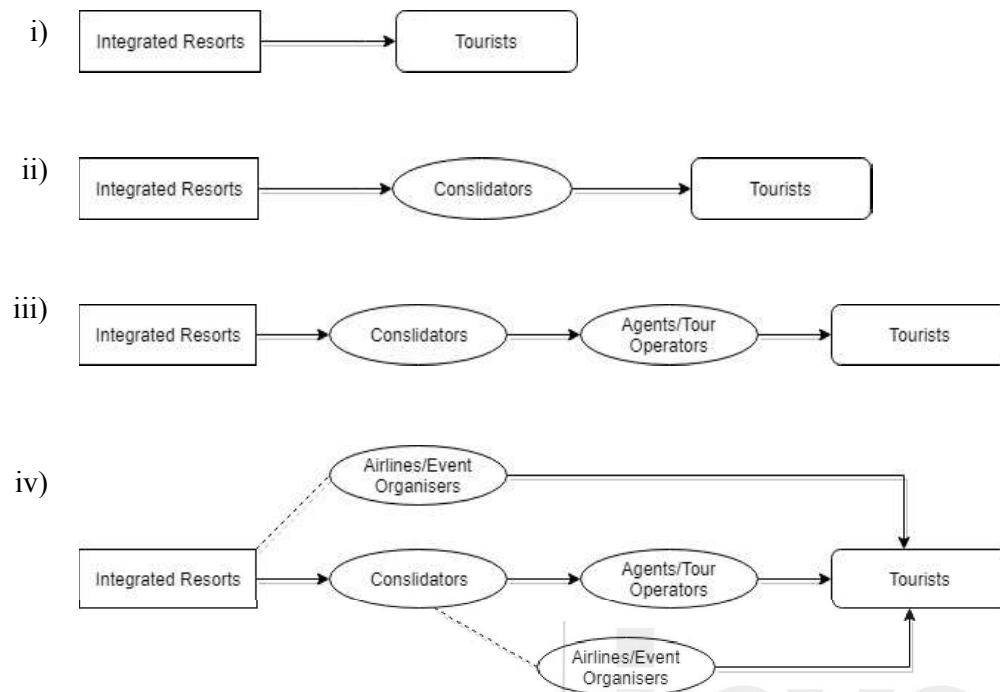


Fig. 14.5: Distribution network of resorts

3) Transport–Flights

A seat in an airline is the major product of the scheduled airline companies. Other products they sell in case of a full-service airline include lounge services, in-flight shopping etc. While a budget airline earn revenue from a number of sources such as selling preferred seat, in-flight services, extra baggage, priority baggage, etc. The following diagram illustrates the distribution channel of a full-service carrier such as Air India.

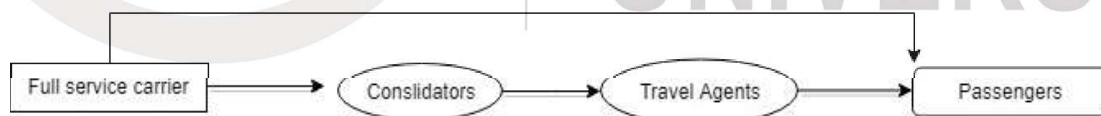


Fig.14.6: Distribution network of airlines (Full service carriers)

The Low-Cost Carriers (LCC) / No Frill Airlines such as SpiceJet on the other hand depends more on direct sales through its booking applications, websites as well as through travel agents.

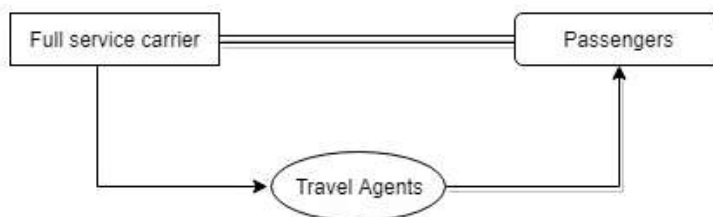


Fig. 14.7: Distribution network of low cost carriers

14.3.1 Intermediaries and Channel Partners

In the era of technology and networking, the travel intermediaries play an active role as channel partners. Customers have distinct requirements and the tourism market size is very broad, hence the channel partners need specialised knowledge of tourism products. In the recent decade, we find many small, micro, and medium enterprises in tourism. Homestays, holiday resorts, start using web platforms to mark their presence, and offer products directly to the guests. Traveltriangle.com, tripshelf.com, etc. offers a platform for small enterprises to list their organisations and sell their packages to tourists. Travel boutiqueonline.com offers similar facilities to hoteliers and it facilitates other service providers as well.

During the tourist seasons, big companies hold the booking of rooms in resorts / hotels so that they can offer packages to tourists in an attractive way. The booking sites such as hotels.com, bookings.com are exclusively known for hotel bookings. Expedia.com, Tripadvisor.com offers various services including hotels, airline, car rental, restaurants, etc.

The internet platform has changed the way business is being conducted completely and the customer can now avail all required services through mobile, tablet or computer instead of visiting a travel agent or tour operator. Hence the digital relationship within the channel is offering a win-win opportunity to vendors and intermediaries.

Check Your Progress - 1

1) Define Distribution Channel.

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2) Explain the importance of distribution channels ?

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3) Examine the pattern of distribution channels of destination management authorities?

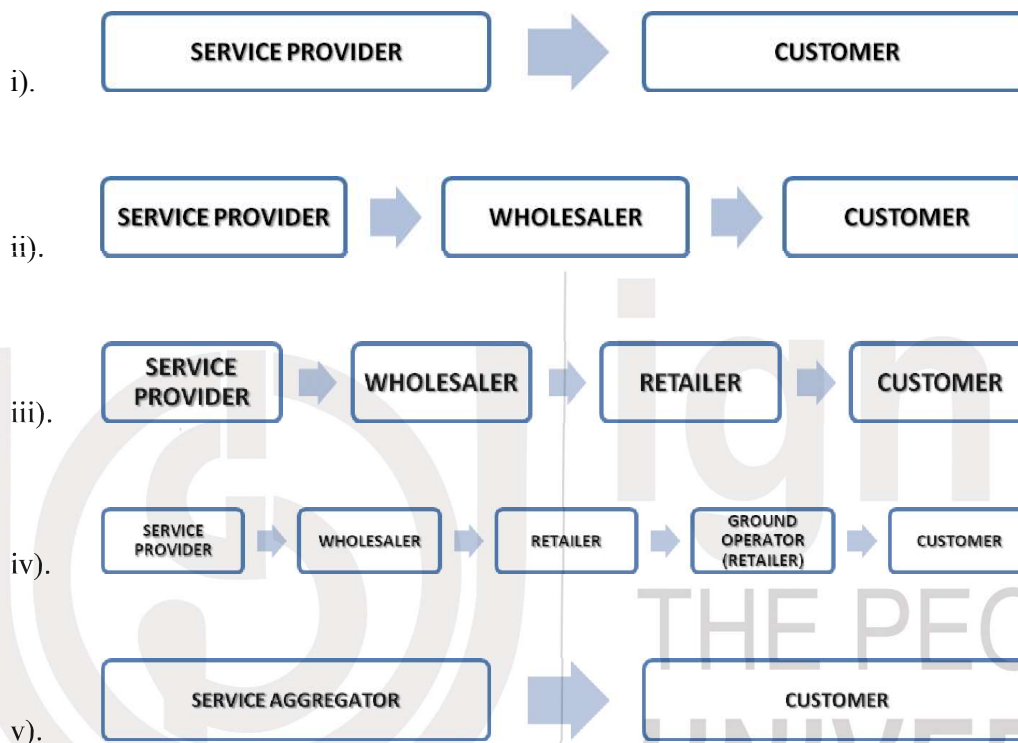
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14.4 DISTRIBUTION CHANNEL DESIGN

Distribution Channel is a framework of supplier / service provider and customers. Channel here refers to how the supplier reaches the customer and the consumer. The process of reaching the customer by the supplier can either have many mediators or none. Depending upon the number of mediators between the supplier and customer, there can be many levels of distribution channels. These levels can be as mentioned below:



(Aggregator is a technology-based organisation, which offers all products online and the customers can access it from the portals.)

Fig. 14. 8: Distribution Channel Design

The first four are traditional model of doing business, but the last one deals with the technology-based business, which can connect people of different walks of life in different geographical locations, provided the internet network is good.

Tour operation business often does business with ground operators or local agents, which help facilitate both to get more business. This is called as Business to Business (B2B) transactions. An example, through illustration, is given below:



Fig. 14.9: Business to Business (B2B) transaction

The above diagram explains the example from Tourism. A Tour Operator at Sydney, sends an initial query to a Delhi Based Operator; and the Delhi based operator manages the trip, and make necessary arrangements in India. Delhi based operator gets the support of a Jaipur based operator, who picks up the guest from airport / railway station at Jaipur, completes the check in process, and conduct the tour.

The above example shows how one main service provider initiates a business by connecting with others who act as mediators as well as final service provider to the customer. These mediators and service providers are both channel partners for the main service provider

Distribution channels play an equally important role in the expansion of business operations. For example, in hospitality industry, we find the following practices as part of business expansion:-

- i) **Chain Hotels:** Developing chain hotels to serve customers at different locations with the same brand, under one management. For example, Taj Group, Oberoi Group, etc.
- ii) **Franchising:** In this case, the brand identity is shared with interested investors who have properties at different locations. The property is owned by the local people, and managed locally. The royalty of the brand is paid to the principal organisation. Sheraton, Radisson group of hotels, are doing business through this mode.
- iii) **Manchising:** This means company takes over the property and manages with its own staff. The building belongs to the owner, and given on lease to a management company for a certain period of time through an agreement. The company has the management and the franchise. Many hotel managements apply this business model, in order to ensure same standards and quality of offering.

14.4.1 Selecting Channel Members

Kotler et.al. (2008), states that the selection of channel members is based on:

- customer needs,
- the company's ability to attract channel members,
- the economic feasibility of the channel; and
- the controlling factor.

Let's now check few factors that play a role in selecting channel members. Main Service Provider need to take care of some factors while deciding the Channel Partners:

- i) **The business size of the supplier:** If the business size of the supplier is small, having multiple members in the channel is not viable for the business. Hence, reaching the target group directly will be the ideal choice of the supplier.

- ii) **The geographical range, its product to be present:** If the service provider wishes to limit the business size to a limited scale, the number of channel partners can be less.
- iii) **The existing pattern of the distribution channel:** This means the type of the existing channel present in the market, its strength and weakness.
- iv) **Competition in the market:** Competition in the market is another important aspect which deals with the competing businesses and its offering is another factor to be taken in to account while deciding about the channel partner.
- v) **Cost factor:** Another important point is that the cost involved in delivering the services. It is common that the cost factor can be high per unit when it finally reaches the customer. To reduce cost and make the offering attractive, most of the service providers use technology and do direct sales through its portals. A low-cost domestic airline usually reaches the customers directly in order to reduce the cost. Mobile applications allow users to book the tickets directly from the airlines, or through the intermediaries. In two tier and three tier metro cities, people still depend on travel agents to get air tickets for domestic travel. Booking for corporates and organisations also normally go through the travel agents since travel agents can offer the service on credit. Hence, low cost domestic airlines promote the intermediaries in such cities.
- vi) **Customer's role in selecting the channel member** A service provider has to pay much attention to reach out to customer. We can see ATMs of different banks in almost all major traffic circles/landmarks/shopping malls in a city. ATMs help banks to ease its workload and also facilitate smart banking services to customers through these outlets. Hence, customers do not have to go to the banks for deposit and withdrawal of cash, remittance of drafts and cheques, etc. and save lot of time. Customer selects the bank that offers best services in short time. Big business organisations establish franchise business in small cities and tier 2 cities as their business grows. This facilitates customers from small cities to access the services of reputed companies in their own place. Customer selects the organisation that is available and accessible.
- vii) **Companies' ability to attract channel members.:** The attractiveness of a product or services, availability of substitute product, market demand, financial benefits, etc results in finding the right channel partner. For example, all travel agents do not sell Caribbean Cruises. Travel agents selling cruises can be found mainly at metro and major cities. The demand for luxurious cruises is felt more in the metro and other A tier cities where residents have an understanding of cruises and show a demand for it. So, Cruise Companies may try to attract channel members in small town or cities but are unable to do so as the demand of cruises

are not high or regular in small cities and towns. Therefore, the distribution channel is not extensive as company is unable to attract channel members

viii) **Control of intermediaries.** Let us take the example of Indian Railways. You may find a number of travel agents who sell railway tickets of various classes in passenger and express trains. These travel agents are authorized by Indian Railways. For its luxury tourist train services in India, tickets are sold not through the irctc website or mobile application, but these packages are sold through specialized tour operators as the package since costs are very high.

Another example of selecting channel member is when an online platform or aggregator sells package tours of various attractions. Here the online platform charges a sum (ex. 2 lakhs) as a refundable security amount from the small enterprises, so that the firm will not back out from its offering in case of any conflicts of interest arising, the aggregator already has a certain sum as security deposit which can be retained.

We can say that tourist service providers use multiple channels to reach customers as single channel will not be sufficient to meet the organizational goals of any tourism business.

14.4.2 Challenges in Tourism Distribution Channels

Tourism and hospitality industry is a very sensitive industry as the impact of every crisis is felt on this trade. War, economic recession diseases, diplomatic relations etc. have a serious consequence on tourism trade. For example, the outbreak of novel Corona virus literally broke down the travel trade and hospitality industry worldwide. It will take several years to recover from this impact. Several people involved in travel trade have been badly affected by the spread of this disease. Hotels ran without business, airlines stopped operations, travel agents cancelled reservations, and the cities once crowded with tourists appeared as a ghost city. So, with tourism at hold due to crisis distribution channels were not required or utilized on before.

Another challenge is technology and its intervention in trade. Emergence of technology-based aggregators has reduced the barriers in accessing different channels. This aggravated competition and the disruption of trade caused by information technology, has given autonomy to the users to select own preferred service provider and customise the requirements.

Digital and technological growth has also led to another challenge, the incremental growth in cybercrimes and unethical practices by miscreants. There are three categories of online fraud practices found in tourism industry:

In the first case, individuals develop clone sites and apps which appear similar to the reputed brands. They promise regular services in tourism, and

the customer without being conscious of the mistake, falls in to the trap and book services:

In the second category, the financial fraud by miscreants can literally take away the bank balance of a customer. They use sophisticated algorithm to trace the banking transactions of the customers and payment gateways they then withdraw money from the customers' bank accounts without their knowledge.

In the third category, the cut throat competition of technology service providers and their business strategy is also a potential challenge. Aggregators have limited control on their distribution networks as complaints of guests appear in reviews that show the gap between the promised service and the service delivered. An example will give you a better understanding. A customer uses hotel aggregator to book a budget category room in a city. After detailed search in websites, the customer finds a hotel, book the room from the website of the aggregator. After arrival in the city, while searching the location of the building, the client could not find the hotel and later realizes that there is no such hotel in that locality. In this example, a false promise of the aggregator can lead to numerous troubles to customers in a new city.

Tourism distribution system needs integration of different enterprises involved in the network and there are various challenges the service provider face while doing business. The fundamental concept of business, i.e. trust and mutual understanding are the prerequisite for the channel members and role of technology can integrate this relationship permanently or temporarily disrupt the trade.

14.5 TOURISM SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT (TSCM)

In this section we will discuss the supply chain management in Tourism Industry and it will be referred to as Tourism Supply Chain Management or TSCM in this section (TSCM). TSCM represents the entire activities involved in tourism production to the delivery of the services to the customer. The concept of TSCM originated in manufacturing industry. Corporations and companies designed systems to facilitate vendor management inventory solutions as the modern business environment necessitates efficient management of the role players in the supply chain. TSCM is a network of enterprises, which fulfil different functions. In general marketing terms, this term is coined with inventory and logistics management.

14.5.1 Definition

In the words of Ramaswamy and Namakumari (2009, p.491), 'supply chain management encompasses the entire activities and steps involved in

designing a distribution system'. Song (2014, p.2) defined tourism supply chain management as “a set of approaches utilised to efficiently manage the operations of tourism supply chain within a specific tourism destination to meet tourism needs from the targeted source market and accomplish the business objectives of different enterprises within tourism supply chain”.

“Tourism Supply Chain Management consists of the coordination of internal logistics in the company, interaction with external operators and the development of a shared strategy” (Quattrociocchia et al., 2017, p.77-78.).

Kaukal et al. (2000) suggested that a tourism value chain consists of four components: -

(i) Tourism Supplier, (ii) Tour Operator, (iii) Travel Agent, (iv) Customer

The following diagram illustrate the complex network of tourism product supply chain

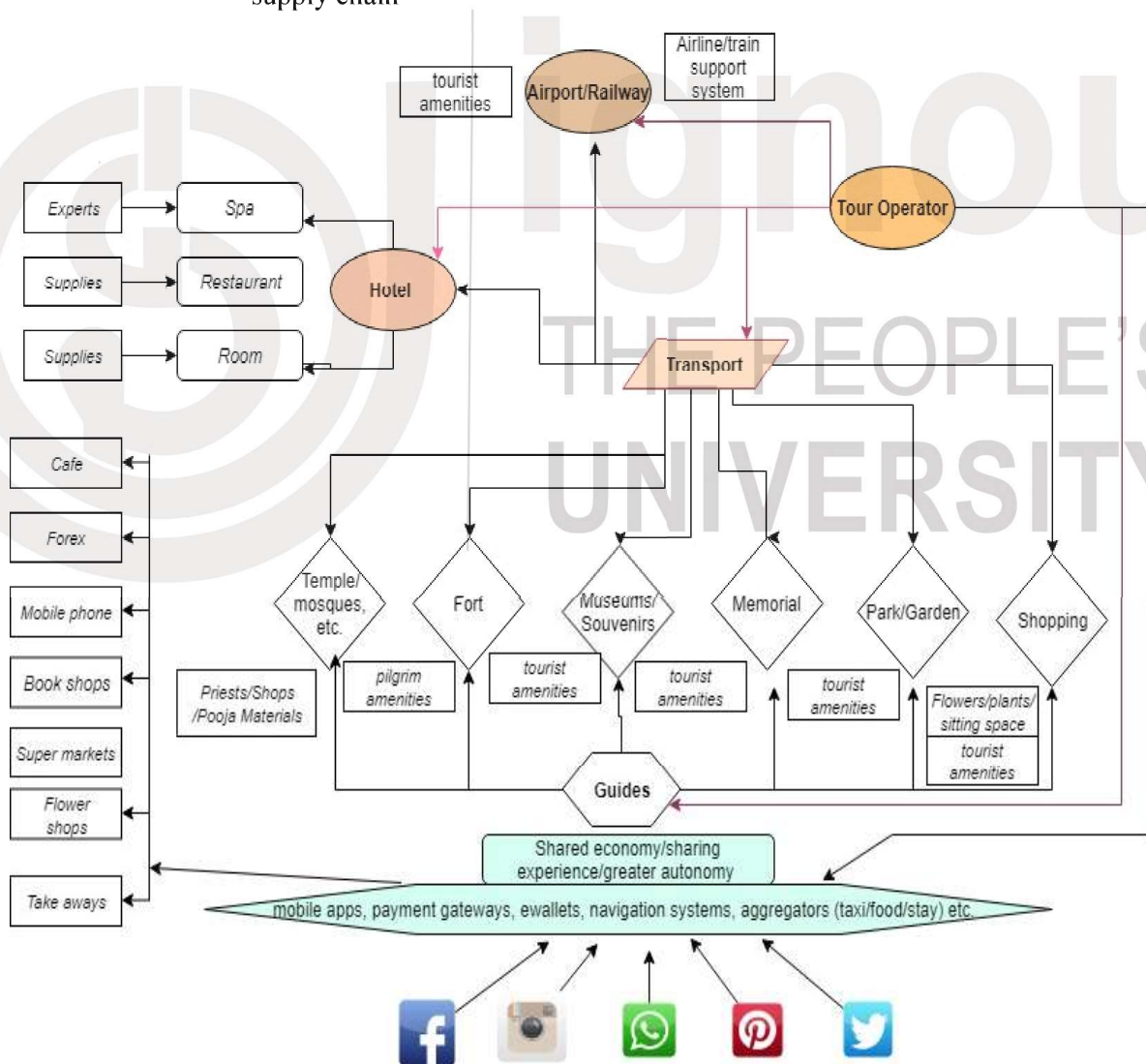


Fig. 14.9: Complexity of tourism distribution network

14.5.2 Supply Chain Management Issues in Tourism

Critical issues in tourism supply chain management include –

- demand management,
- supply management,
- relationship between two parties,
- product development, and
- tourism supply chain coordination.

An example will provide a better insight on the above points. We all know that during peak seasons the hotel rates shoot up and same in the case of air travel charges and other components. Consolidators block rooms in large numbers and a heavy investment is required to do advance bookings. The outbreak of novel Corona virus resulted in cancellations of package tours (including fixed departures and customised packages). Every member in the distribution channel was adversely affected and several companies lost the advance amount that they paid to hotels and other service providers. The entire supply chain was badly affected including well established organisations to small enterprises. This example illustrates the case of demand and supply issues in travel trade which impacts the Supply Chain Management.

Tourism supply chain consists of products/services offerings from many enterprises and the final product is an amalgam of these products/services. Integration of the channel, coordination of channel members is essential to offer a composite product. For example, an airline depends on the in-flight caterer to provide the required supplies at airports. Due to any reasons, if the flight caterer is unable to manage the items offered in the menu, this will result in customer dissatisfaction and reflect poorly on the airline and not the caterer. Similarly, the airport authorities must ensure that the ground handling staff functions efficiently so that there is no delay or mishandling of the passenger baggages. Passengers blame the airlines in case of any mishandling or delay in baggage handling whereas in reality the management of airport as well as the timely disposal of baggage after flight lands depends as much on the airport authorities as it does on the airlines. Take another example of in-flight entertainment. The touch screen panel placed in front of the seats for entertainment purpose may not work in some seats in the old aircrafts. The passengers often complaint about this to the cabin crew, who are not equipped or trained to handle this kind of maintenance problem while on air, and it reflects poorly on the airline. These examples illustrate that tourism product offering is a complex phenomenon and affects the entire SCM.

Companies adopt different strategies to control the supply chain management with regard to competition.

- **Horizontal integration** is one such approach to reduce the intensity of market competition and to enjoy a better economy of scale. It improves operational efficiency by way of ownership transfer, joint arrangements, and management contracts. It also includes mergers and acquisitions between business that supply similar products or services. You may remember that GoIbibo was acquired by Make My Trip.
- **Vertical integration** is another approach which means acquire or merge with another organisation which provides a different tourism product. For example, Mercury Travels is the tour operating wing of Oberoi Hotels.

In case of a hotel, the number of required items will be pretty large in numbers /quantity. Food and beverage, housekeeping etc. regularly need resources and materials and the inventory manager manages the day to day supply of things. Inventory management is a term commonly used with supply chain management. Invariably, tourism industry also requires inventory management, but on a different scale. It mainly depends on the way resources are utilised and what is consumed by tourists, and what is in demand. A network of different service providers is closely connected with tourism and hospitality industry and each component have a varying role to play.

We can summarise that the tourism supply chain consists of natural resources, cultural resources, human creativity, technology, materials and machines; and proper management of the flow of resources and information in the supply chain is necessary for the smooth transition of services in the Tourism Industry.

Check Your Progress - 2

- 1) What do you understand by channel design?
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- 2) What are the factors to be taken care, while designing a distribution channel?
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- 3) What is the role of supply chain management in tourism?
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- 4) Design a supply chain network diagram for the following business.
- i) Museum ii) Restaurants iii) Cruise lines iv) Sports events
 - v) Amusement Park Management

14.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed different core concepts of tourism distribution and tourism supply chain management. Tourism products or services are offered both directly by the service providers to the customers as well as through different intermediaries of the distribution channels. The number of players (mediators) in a market depends on the nature of competition that prevails in a market as well as the volume of business.

Tourism business is a network of many businesses and hence we find different patterns and levels of distribution channels in Tourism, unlike most of the other industries. Supply chain is a sophisticated network of different enterprises where each firm has an important and well defined role to play. Tourism industry appears to be a highly fragmented industry with large number of service providers; hence tourism industry has a great challenge ahead, of integrating these channels to have better supply chain management.

14.7 FURTHER READINGS

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14.8 CLUES TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

EXERCISES

Check Your Progress -1

- 1) See Sub-section 14.2.1
- 2) See Sub-section 14.2.2
- 3) See Section 14.3

Check Your Progress -2

- 1) See Section 14.4
- 2) See Section 14.4
- 3) See Section 14.5

14.9 ACTIVITIES

Activity 1

Visit the website of an online travel agent and make a list of the products being offered. Find out who are the main suppliers and channels of its distribution.

Activity 2

Visit the webpage of Oyo and find out the properties listed in its page. Compare it with the hotels.com. Identify the similarities and differences in product offering.