

**Manon Niesten, Paul van Oers,  
Mieke Pelzer, Wil Munsters**

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**Entrepreneurs in Niche Tourism :  
Risk Factors and Success Factors...**

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## CULTURAL TOURISM

MANON NIESTEN<sup>A,D,E,G</sup>, PAUL VAN OERS<sup>B,F</sup>, MIEKE PELZER<sup>A,B,F</sup>, WIL MUNSTERS<sup>A,E,F</sup>

Centre for Cultural Tourism Research

Zuyd University of Applied Sciences (The Netherlands)

wil.munsters@zuyd.nl

### **Entrepreneurship in niche tourism: risk factors and success factors. The case of the Dutch Province of Limburg**

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#### **Abstract**

Limburg, a province in the southern part of the Netherlands, is developing a tourism policy which focuses on new niche markets based on the growing demand for spirituality and regional gastronomy. However, the problem is that many entrepreneurs operating in these emerging niche markets miss the key competencies needed in order to run their company in a professional way. They are driven by their personal passion rather than by profit or the demand of the market. An important challenge for the future will be to support these niche market entrepreneurs in acquiring the necessary entrepreneurial competencies without belieing their specific personal characteristics.

#### **Passion before profit**

The modern tourist is constantly looking for new experiences. Uniqueness, atmosphere and the quality of leisure time are getting more and more important. The government of the Province of Limburg in the southern part of the Netherlands aims at meeting these consumer needs by developing a tourism policy which focuses on new niche markets based on the demand for spiritualism, wellness and gastronomy. All three of them belong to the special interest segments with the highest growth potential in the Netherlands. But this ambition is restrained by the fact that a lot of entrepreneurs in these emerging niche markets show a lack of basic competencies needed in order to run their business in an efficient and effective way. Research reveals that it is hard for these entrepreneurs to formulate a good company policy, including objectives and strategies. Market knowledge is not always available and product development, promotion and distribution should be more adequate. Besides, niche entrepreneurs are often solo performers who tend to put too little effort into cooperation with stakeholders in the sector. The principal driver for niche entrepreneurs is their passion, while earnings and profit are considered to be of less importance. Although most entrepreneurs

do realize that it is crucial to know the needs and wants of the market and to anticipate consumer trends, it is really hard for them to put this growing awareness into practice. It feels unnatural to them to market their products because in their opinion the right customer will spontaneously find and buy their products. Their own passion comes first and they are convinced that there will always be a category of tourists who appreciate what they offer. In other words, the majority of niche entrepreneurs is more product-oriented than market-oriented, which means that a lot of market opportunities are not noticed nor exploited.

The research focuses on three main questions:

- What are the main determinants for a company's success in a niche market?
- What are the main differences, related to personality characteristics, between a niche entrepreneur and a traditional entrepreneur in tourism?
- What competencies are essential for niche entrepreneurs and need to be improved in the future?

The answers to these questions will be illustrated by the analysis of demand and supply within the contemplative and ecogastronomic tourism niche markets.

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Factor	Strengths	Weaknesses
Tourism supply	Various offer: landscape, history, built heritage, traditions	
Tourism image	Strong image based on hospitality, gastronomy and atmosphere	Inadequate international branding as a tourist destination
Situation	Central location in the Euregion Meuse-Rhine between Belgium (cities of Liège and Hasselt) and Germany (city of Aachen)	
Competitiveness and entrepreneurship	Second position in the national lodging industry	Lack of cooperation, coordination and networking between entrepreneurs  The mass of initiatives in tourism makes it difficult for entrepreneurs to get the right information at the right place at the right time

Field	Opportunities	Threats
Market supply side		Heavy competition with other regional destinations
Market demand side	The experience economy: consumers are willing to spend more time and money in order to get memorable holiday experiences  Tourists are looking for authentic values: truthfulness of origins, intentions and behaviour, especially related to hospitality  Localisation as a reaction to cultural globalisation  More interest of tourists for high quality food and gastronomy  The need to get away from the hectic life of every day	

Figure 1. SWOT-analysis of the Limburg region as a tourism product

### Regional tourism context

Limburg is a province in the southern part of the Netherlands and located in the so-called Euregion Meuse-Rhin between Belgium and Germany. Since a variety of stakeholders in Limburg have become aware of the fact that tourism has to be a top priority, the government of the Province has formulated as a main objective to increase the number of visits and tourists as well as the average spending per tourist visitor in order to create long-term growth, employment and prosperity.

Some facts and figures over 2009 [ZKA 2010]:

- The total number of national guest nights in the Netherlands equalled 94 million, of which 12 million guests stayed in Limburg in all types of accommodation (hotels, campings, holiday villages). As a tourism region, Limburg holds the second position within the Dutch national market.
- The total number of guest nights of foreign guests for the Netherlands as a whole equalled

25 million, of which 1.9 million guests stayed in Limburg (mainly tourists from Belgium, Germany and the United Kingdom).

- The number of daytrips (102 million) related to culture were higher in Limburg than in the other Dutch provinces.
- Tourism in Limburg generates 2.5 billion euros and accounts for almost 40.000 jobs, i.e. 7% of the total employment in the province.

An overall analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats regarding the region of Limburg leads to the following outcomes [cf. Dijk, Verver 2006]:

### Profile of the niche market entrepreneur

Niche tourism can be defined as special interest based tourism for particular market segments having the same demographic, buying behaviour and lifestyle characteristics. It involves small

numbers of tourists in authentic settings for whom a tailor made product providing a unique experience is a basic need.

There are several main determinants for a company's success in a niche market. Niche markets are particularly interesting for companies looking for growth or change. They are an attractive opportunity available to small businesses to compete against the scale economies that larger competitors are able to achieve. Most niche marketing is driven by changing consumer behaviour (on the demand side) or changing personal interests (on the business organization side). Identifying core competencies is a key element when developing a sound marketing strategy, especially for niche markets. The most crucial success factor for niche marketing is to match up with the capabilities, preferences and resources of the individual entrepreneur. With regard to the tourism industry in general, the following list of key competencies necessary for successful entrepreneurship can be drawn up [cf. Morrison, Thomas 1999; Jagersma 2000]:

1. Strategic thinking: the formulation of ambitions and strategies to realise them. A mission and a vision, objectives, goals and planning are needed in order to achieve the desired results. The company's strategy has to be founded on relevant management information such as an analysis of the company's strengths and weaknesses and of the opportunities and threats in the external environment.

2. Opportunity alertness: the successful entrepreneur is continuously focusing on emerging trends and is capable to identify relevant opportunities for innovation.

3. Innovation and creativity: the ability to turn opportunities into renewal of products or services by application of expertise and imagination.

4. Creative resourcing and risk taking: combining financial resources in a responsible way by taking revenues as well as expenses into consideration. The successful entrepreneur is willing to take risks in order to achieve his goals because he knows that taking no risks is really risky.

5. Customer sensitivity: awareness of the consumer's needs and the wants, the necessity of high quality service and long term relationships with customers.

6 Employee focus: the most important asset of a company is the employees and especially in tourism which is a people business. The professional entrepreneur sees and values the best in his personnel and pays attention to a good atmosphere on the floor by investing in team building.

7. Relationship management: networking is the key business activity in order to get new

information and expertise on the one hand and to realise collaboration and sales on the other hand. The people the entrepreneur knows can be more important than the things he knows.

8. Entrepreneurial learning: the motivation to acquire practical knowledge and expertise through both doing and reflecting on what one does.

Most of the niche entrepreneurs in Limburg miss half of these main competencies, namely:

- Strategic thinking
- Creative resourcing
- Customer sensitivity
- Relationship management

These gaps lie at the bottom of the main weaknesses of this type of entrepreneur:

- The absence of a company strategy
- The lack of market knowledge and of awareness of tourist's needs and wants
- The absence of a marketing policy based on a SWOT-analysis and focusing on professional promotion and distribution of the product
- Supply-oriented thinking resulting in inadequate product development
- Unwillingness to adapt the product to the demand, caused by the fixed idea that the product is so good in itself that it will be valued by the right customer
- No affinity for financial issues, such as return on investment
- The lack of cooperation with business partners due to the deeply rooted individualism of the niche entrepreneur, the fear to share business information with competitors and the pitfall of organizational myopia [cf. Niesten, Troilo 2009].

At the same time, some of these weaknesses can work as strengths. Although the passion of the entrepreneur makes him in a way blind for the demand side of the market, it is the same personal drive that enables the entrepreneur to respond quite naturally to the consumer's need of experience by telling the story of his product. He can only do so thanks to his specialist knowledge of the product, which has to be considered as the main strength of the niche entrepreneur. In more than one respect, the niche market entrepreneur shares the characteristics attributed to the so-called *life style entrepreneur* who is driven by passion and personal interest rather than by profit [Peters *et al.* 2009].

Given that Limburg has decided to focus its efforts on the niche markets of contemplative tourism and ecogastronomic tourism, this policy can only succeed if it is based on the involvement of the niche entrepreneurs. That is the reason why it is absolutely necessary to take into account the typical profile of the niche entrepreneur, including his strengths and weaknesses in knowledge, skills and



attitude, as appears obviously from the following analysis of both markets.

### **Contemplative tourism, an escape from the masses**

#### *Contemplative tourism as a market opportunity*

Contemplative tourism can be defined as a tourist experiential activity that leads to inner peace and balance and that is linked to the meaning to life. This type of tourism is rapidly growing in the province of Limburg thanks to the internal strengths of the region and the favourable external developments analysed above. The suppliers of contemplative tourism products and services in Limburg's countryside can benefit from the need for authentic personal experiences and the desire to escape from the busy everyday life in order to contemplate on life in peace and quiet. In rural Limburg the contemplative tourist finds the beauty and the stillness of the landscape he is searching for. Furthermore, Limburg has another important asset which meets the needs of this tourist. The Catholic faith has a long tradition in this region but, due to secularization, buildings like churches and monasteries are losing their religious function, become vacant and even abandoned. The provincial government of Limburg wants to preserve this built heritage by creating new functions for it, such as exploitation for tourism purposes. Another worth mentioning factor that stimulates the growth of this niche market is the ageing of the West-European population. Senior citizens (50+) have much time and money to spend and seek culture, nature and rest during their holiday [Munsters 2007]. The yearly revenue of contemplative tourism for Limburg is estimated to have a value between 11 and 16 million euros in the near future.

#### *Contemplative tourism as sustainable tourism*

Contemplative tourism excludes by definition mass tourism. With the development of contemplative tourism quality needs to take precedence over quantity. Care for the quality of the supply determines the attractiveness of the contemplative tourism product and has to keep pace with the ever increasing requirements of the modern critical, for widely-travelled, tourist consumer. So quality tourism and niche tourism can perfectly go hand in hand. In order to achieve the required quality level contemplative tourism has to develop in the direction of sustainable tourism. More than that, because of its respect for the integrity of man, nature and culture, contemplative tourism can only be if it is sustainable. In this way the

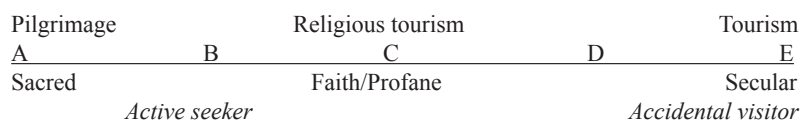
choice for contemplative tourism can present a sustainable alternative for the mass tourism that is now dominating in South-Limburg and that is characterized by the invasion of hordes of day trippers traditionally attracted by its beautiful hills and valleys. Masses of cars, motorcycles, cyclists and hikers constantly disrupt the beauty and the stillness of the unique landscape. This old form of tourism with its strong negative impact on the natural environment and on the quality of life of the local people can be replaced, to a certain extent, by new forms like contemplative tourism which pursue a balance between the economic benefits of tourism on the one hand and the protection of the nature, culture and local life on the other hand. If combined in harmony, the objectives of the various stakeholders in this field of tension form the basis for the *natural and cultural tourism sustainability mix*, the four Ps of which are:

- Preservation = optimizing the conservation of the natural and cultural tourism supply
- Population = maximizing the socio-cultural and economic advantages for the host community
- Public = optimizing the holiday experience for the tourist visitors
- Profit = maximizing the long-term yield and continuity for the tourism industry [Munsters 2005].

#### *Demand and supply*

The first steps in research on contemplative tourism in Limburg have been taken. Studies have been carried out with regard to the demand side of contemplative tourism [ZKA 2008]. The most important findings are that the contemplative market can be divided into three submarkets: religious tourism, spiritual tourism and wellness tourism. For the latter, there should be a link with spirituality and the meaning of life. It's also necessary to keep in mind the potential of the business to business market.

Two kinds of tourists are identified. The first category includes the tourists who visit Limburg for other motives than contemplation. This accidental tourist will come to Limburg because of the landscape or the cultural sites. When passing by the contemplative offer, he will visit it. The second group of tourists are those who actively seek an offer related to contemplation and reflection. The features of this contemplative (mainly spiritual) tourist have been submitted to a more detailed analysis leading to the following socio-demographic profile: mostly 45+, mainly women, belonging to the higher income categories and the higher social classes and having often received a religious upbringing. It has to be noticed, however, that more and more men become



**Figure 2.** The Pilgrim-Tourist Motive path [Smith 1992]

Legend:

A = Pious pilgrim

B = Pilgrim > tourist

C = Pilgrim = tourist

D = Pilgrim < tourist

E = Secular tourist

interested in spirituality and younger (35+) people as well.

Smith has described the continuum between religion-oriented visit motives in the so-called Pilgrim-Tourist Motive path [Smith 1992]:

The pilgrims with a pure religious motive are on the one end of the continuum and on the other end the secular tourist can be found. When linking the previously mentioned typologies of contemplative tourists to this continuum, the active seeker, being primarily driven by sacred and profane rather than secular motives, can be positioned at the left side of the continuum, and the accidental visitor at the right side of the continuum since the visit motives are more secular.

Another study on the demand side [Lee 2010] shows that the contemplative tourist finds the following factors most important with respect to the contemplative products and services: personal contact, the contemplative entrepreneur, the content and the experience. This need matches well with the observed strengths of the niche entrepreneur. On the contrary, the brand, the history, the accessibility and the costs are considered to be aspects of less importance.

Simultaneously, research has been done on the supply side [Bernards *et al.* 2009]. First, the regional companies offering products and services to the contemplative tourist were inventoried and evaluated. On the basis of this study, a long list of a 100 successful contemplative companies was produced and 34 of them were selected and presented in a glossy magazine. Next, a website was created displaying the offer of contemplative tourism in Limburg. Another outcome of this research was that the entrepreneurial skills needed to provide tourist services were often missing in the contemplative companies. The company owners did their work out of passion and with the firm conviction of ‘doing the right thing’. In their eyes, a tourism market-oriented approach would be contrary to their mission.

*An illustrative pilot: the monastery of Wittem*

In order to bring inspiring figureheads into the limelight and to acquire the necessary experience

with improving the supply and the management, a number of contemplative services suppliers have been designated as pilots for research and development. Illustrating very well the problems and the challenges the suppliers of contemplative services are dealing with, the monastery in Wittem has been selected as a pilot for the southern part of Limburg. Nowadays, this huge monastery is housing not more than 10 to 15 fathers, all members of the congregation of Redemptorists, and their number continues to decrease. The number of visitors is anything between 150.000 and 180.000 per year, but it is declining. Research has shown that the foundation that exploits this monastery has to look for new ways to earn revenues since the costs of the building are rising and the Catholic church has reduced its financial contribution. Relevant product and market development strategies for this monastery are:

- offering overnight stays in the monastery to the contemplative tourists by responding to the growing popularity of retreats
- exploiting the kitchen so that tourists and other visitors can enjoy an honest meal prepared with local and regional products
- offering not only religious services but also spiritual services in order to reach a broader target group
- improving the accessibility to the public by rearranging the interior of the monastery [Niesten, Troilo 2009].

### **From mass & fast to small & slow: ecogastronomic tourism**

*In pursuit of new authentic gastronomic values: the rise of the culture sensitive tourist*

Food scandals raised by the mad-cow disease and the bird flu indicate that food has become an industrial product and that the phrase “fresh and traditionally prepared” is an empty and meaningless marketing slogan. The seven seas are overfished and virtually empty. How shall man deal with mass consumption and how long will Mother Earth

allow it? Consequently, consumer trust has been betrayed and tourists start searching for cultural environments that are not only authentic but also highlight common human sensitive standards and values.

Now that the volume driven cultures and strategies lose their importance and profit is no longer the only objective in developing tourism and cultural policies, the tourist as a gastronomic consumer has come to ask himself which new values have to be created instead of the old ones. So he is confronted with some fundamental questions, such as:

- If you are what you eat but you no longer know what you eat, how do you know who you are?
- Shouldn't we appreciate more what we already have?
- How to deal with core values such as authenticity, genuineness, act and live like you are?

In the search of answers to these questions the new tourist consumer (re)discovers his own personal values and feels the need of authentic food cultures that closely match these values. He selects holiday destinations that offer cultural depth and authentic traditions embedded in quality tourism products.

Failing to respond to this change in consumption patterns, the traditional food service industry (restaurants, cafés, bars, catering companies) is confronted with big losses because consumers buy less and pay less. The world of food service is mainly focused on industrial food production techniques with as ultimate goal to make a food product as cheaply as possible. Obviously, the mass and fast-industry does no longer meet consumer trends because of its price and cost-driven focus, while consumers desire personalized attention, individual offers, combinations of durability and convenience, and healthy, honest and authentic products so that they know what they eat and drink [De Boer *et al.* 2010; Masselink 2010]. Rejecting the global food monoculture caused by "McDonaldisation", tourists show a new interest in local products and regional gastronomy. As a reaction to globalisation, this so-called phenomenon of *localisation* explains also the growing number of supporters of the Slow Food Movement launched by the Italian Carlo Petrini and promoting healthy, varied and savoury food based on pure and natural local products [Munsters 2007].

"Less is more" having more and more become a guiding principle in consumer choices, mass tourism and fast food will obviously lose ground in favour of a small scale and slow gastronomic tourism. It is necessary to realize that authentic gastronomy is too fragile for mass tourism. With the development of new forms of gastronomic tourism, quality becomes more important than quantity.

Just like contemplative tourism, these new forms of gastronomic niche tourism put the emphasis on sustainability and can be heaped together with *ecogastronomic tourism* as a common denominator.

#### *Limburg: an ecogastronomic paradise?*

With regard to its gastronomy Limburg has a strong reputation: 94% of tourists think the quality of food and beverage is good in this region. Indeed, the regional gastronomic offer is various. For instance, there are a dozen and more *terroir* specialities with their own artisanal traditions and gourmet recipes, varying from cheese, apple syrup and mustard, bread and pastry to authentic beers, ciders and wines. All these products are 100 % regional, sustainable and affordable food and drinks rooted in a true story.

Another asset of the cultural tourism product of Limburg is the synergy between regional gastronomy and the built heritage. Monuments serve as a background for markets of regional products which in this way become even more authentic and attractive for the public, locals and tourists alike. Conversely, this kind of ecogastronomic events lend an additional value to monuments by letting them come to life [cf. Munsters 2007]. Château gastronomy, monastery gastronomy, farm gastronomy and mill gastronomy provide all clear illustrations of this interaction between gastronomy and monuments combining an authentic historical atmosphere with real *terroir* hospitality. An element that is still missing within the ecogastronomic tourism product offer are *routes de terroir* like gastronomic green walks and gourmet cycling tours.

However, it is impossible to fully develop a regional ecogastronomy without the involvement of the entrepreneurs in the food service sector. Unfortunately, the gastronomic entrepreneurs in Limburg are using far too little authentic regional products for two main reasons. In the first place, they ignore how to develop and commercialize innovative gastronomic concepts that appeal to the demand of the new tourist pro-sumer. Secondly, the distribution chain from producer to consumer needs to be optimized. In order to fulfill the requirements of innovative ecogastronomic business the key success factor is the development of awareness of regional gastronomic traditions and of entrepreneurial cultural competencies.

#### *The hinged era*

In this hinged era the future is re-invented. Research shows undeniably that man has to cherish Mother Earth. The time has come for a new communality urging man to ask himself how he can contribute to the well-being of people and animals by consuming responsibly. If, from this new setting,



one reconsiders the role of food and drink as an element of the tourism product, then the large array of tourist consumer's motives to buy – convenience, price, pleasure – will be expanded with a moral and cultural sensitivity and, what is perhaps even more important, with the need for authenticity. If innovative gastronomic business embedded in regional cultures and in sustainable production and distribution chains succeed in taking advantage of this new sensitivity, the niche tourism market of authentic regional ecogastronomy will face a bright future.

### Future research paths

The general conclusion that the professional competencies of tourism niche market entrepreneurs are often underdeveloped has triggered new research questions. The upcoming years the Centre for Cultural Tourism Research of Zuyd University will focus its research programme on the niche markets of contemplative and ecogastronomic tourism by carrying out several field research projects that will be guided by the following central question:

*In what way can a niche market entrepreneur develop his entrepreneurial competencies successfully in order to think and act more according to standard business principles without believing his specific personal characteristics?*

The answers to this central research question will be leading for the support and the advice given to individual entrepreneurs with an emphasis on:

- improving the entrepreneurial competencies by means of training sessions and workshops
- developing innovative concepts and product-market combinations
- disseminating knowledge via internet portals and on-line forums
- creating cooperation structures in the field of promotion and distribution with a view of obtaining critical mass in the tourism market
- working out a blueprint for communication with potential customers
- setting up consumer panels as “sounding boards, “co-producers” and “ambassadors” for niche products and services.

The paradoxical challenge researchers and consultants will have to deal with is that the entrepreneurs who need the most support are the less capable to recognize their problems.

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### Przedsiębiorczość w turystyce niszowej: czynniki ryzyka oraz sukcesu. Przypadek holenderskiej prowincji Limburg

**Słowa kluczowe:** turystyka niszowa, spirytualizm, wellness, eko-gastronomia, przedsiębiorca

#### Streszczenie

Celem badania była odpowiedź na pytania dotyczące głównych czynników decydujących o powodzeniu lub klęsce w turystyce niszowej, wykazanie różnic cech osobowych niszowego oraz tradycyjnego przedsiębiorcy, a także kompetencji niezbędnych do prowadzenia niszowej turystyki. Odpowiedzi na te pytania zostały zilustrowane przez analizę popytu i podaży niszowych



rynków turystycznych związanych z turystyką kontemplacyjną (religijną i duchową), wypoczynkowo-szkoleniową (wellness) oraz eko-gastronomiczną.

Praca koncentruje się na analizie sytuacji, danych statystycznych dotyczących turystyki na terenach południowej części Holandii, w rejonie Meuse-Rhin pomiędzy Belgią a Niemcami. Rząd prowincji Limburg próbuje spełnić potrzeby konsumentów poprzez rozwój niszowych rynków opartych na popycie na spirytualizm, wellness i gastronomię. Rozwój tych dziedzin turystyki często bywa zahamowany przez brak podstawowych kompetencji prowadzących związanych z nimi firm. Znajomości rynku, rozwój produktu, promocja i dystrybucja nie są wystarczające. Według autorów pracy przedsiębiorcy koncentrują się bardziej na swojej pasji niż na prawidłowej promocji swoich działań.

W pracy przedstawiono cechy dobrego przedsiębiorcy zajmującego się turystyką niszową. Obejmują one między innymi: umiejętność strategicznego myślenia, otwartość i gotowość na nowe możliwości, innowacyjność oraz kreatywność, podejmowanie ryzyka, wrażliwość na potrzeby klienta, a także pracowników, zdolności w zarządzaniu zasobami ludzkimi oraz samokształcenie.

W pracy wyróżniono również kategorie turystów oraz motywacje kierujące ich do okręgu Limburg (przypadek, zwiedzanie malowniczych miejsc, pielgrzymka, szukanie miejsca duchowej kontemplacji oraz poszukiwanie zdrowej żywności).

Zdaniem autorów, ich praca może przyczynić się do poprawienia sytuacji indywidualnych przedsiębiorców i wzrostu popularności turystyki niszowej.