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## MARKETING ASPECTS IN THE OPERATIONS OF THE VELEBIT NATURE PARK\*

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**Abstract:** The application of marketing in tourism involves marketing activities undertaken by all producers that are in any way connected to selling their products on the tourist market, as a means of earning revenue. Tourism marketing calls for a marketing concept to be implemented in companies in the tourism sector and other tourism-supply providers. Upon the adoption of the Management Plan of the Velebit Nature Park, a marketing concept, as an element of efficient park management, must be employed to help ensure the prosperity of Park operations in all areas and across all levels.

*Key words:* marketing concept in tourism, tourist market research, tourist market, segmentation, tourism marketing mix, Velebit Nature Park.

### INTRODUCTION

With two national parks under its wing, the Velebit Nature Park is unique and lures many tourists to come experience its attractions. Today, there is a growing demand for such preserved nature sites.

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Because it covers a large area and its specific sites are scattered, this diversity is what distinguishes the Velebit Nature Park from other nature parks in Croatia. Therefore, applying a marketing concept and employing skilled marketing staff are indispensable in ensuring that the Park's operations and development are efficiently managed.

## **1. THE MARKETING PROCESS IN TOURISM**

Tourism marketing refers to the application of marketing given the conditions specific to a tourist market and tourism products. In tourism, this means that a customer must travel to the place where a service is provided. Tourism marketing calls for a marketing concept to be implemented in companies in the tourism sector and other tourism-supply providers.

### **1.1. Tourist Market Research and Segmentation**

The advent of tourism has influenced the creation of the tourist market as a specific type of market. A market is a set of all products or services which clients perceive as being capable of meeting their needs. (McDonald 2004, 129) A market is also a set of interdependent relationships among businesses, supply and demand. The elements of a tourist market include a market subject, object and prices. This specific trait comes from the special attributes of tourism product and the characteristics of tourism supply and demand.

Market research is a marketing function used to gather information needed for decision-making, and to provide insight to a specific marketing problem. (Mc Donald 2004, 472)

Resulting from differing consumer preferences, heterogeneous tourist markets are becoming increasingly important and have brought about market segmentation. Market segmentation is a way by which a company seeks to gain an advantage over its rivals. (Mc Donald 2004, 133) It is a procedure of separating the overall tourism market into smaller, homogeneous units or segments. A market segment consists of groups of clients having identical or similar needs. Each segment may be selected as a target market on which a company will act using a different marketing mix.

The most often are used demographic, geographic or psychographic criteria for market segmentation. Specific criteria of tourist behaviour are also important. These criteria provide information on why tourists choose to vacation in a specific destination, which elements of the tourism product are they attracted to, what are their opinions of the destination, etc.

Market segmentation is, in fact, part of a broader strategic concept in modern marketing that is effected through so-called marketing STP (segmenting, targeting, positioning) that involves: (Senecic 1998, 44) segmentation, the selection of a target market and product positioning. After segmentation has been carried out and the various segments assessed, the company needs to decide which segments and how many segments to select as its target markets. It is vital that a tourism offering provider selects

the most appealing segments, and designs the promotion program, product brand, price and distribution channel policy accordingly. Attention should also be focused on the durability and profitability of market segments.

### **1.2. The Marketing Mix in Tourism**

A marketing mix is a group of marketing tools that a company uses to accomplish its marketing goals on a target market. (Kotler 1994, 82) Marketing literature has established four basic marketing functions, known as the 4Ps of marketing: (Senecic i Vukonic 1997, 45) product, prices, place (distribution) and promotion. At the heart of marketing activities is the tourist, against whom marketing goals are set; marketing strategies, formulated; and the most favourable combination of marketing elements, selected. (Kotler 1994, 82)

Tourism has a complex product, made up of individual services and products. On the other hand, it is a product in progress, because it is subject to constant upgrading by tourism consumers. According to Kobasic (Senecic i Vukonic 1997, 85), "a tourism product is a set of available goods, services and conveniences that tourists can use to meet their needs in a specific area and in a specific time". Other authors have called this complex product an integrated product. This integrated tourism product is a package tour, representing the basic product of travel agencies, and it comprises a number of primary products brought together to form a whole according to the interests and requirements of demand.

Price determines a tourist market, in particular the level of demand, and it is the only revenue-generating element of the marketing mix. It is vital to a tourism product's policy because the demand for a specific product and the performance of tourism offering providers depend upon it. It follows that actual costs have a weaker impact on price than the purchasing power of individuals or segments of tourism consumers.

Distribution is a basic marketing function by which goods are marketed on the market. Distribution channels are used to transport the produced products from the manufacturer to the consumer. Distribution channels can be seen as a series of interdependent organisations involved in the process of producing products or services disposable for use or consumption. (Kotler 1994, 638)

On the tourism market, products cannot be transported, because services are stationary, while the consumer or tourist is mobile. Tourism supply providers have two ways of sending their product to the tourist market: (Senecic i Vukonic 1997, 136)

- *through direct distribution*, when tourists buy products directly from their manufacturers
- *through indirect distribution*, when tourism supply providers "distribute" their products on the tourist market through tourism intermediary companies, usually travel agencies.

Promotion is a form of communication with consumers. It is a very complex activity comprising numerous individual activities that help in sales efforts and winning

customers. These activities involve informing, persuading and reminding customers, and help supply providers to encourage sales on the market.

A promotional message must be true, easy to understand, and acceptable. Promotion helps a tourist or customer learn more about the particulars and advantages of a tourism product, makes choosing the type and time of consumption easier, and generates or maintains a positive image on the tourist market. A promotion mix can include advertising, personal selling, sales improvement and publicity. Special attention should be directed to the effectiveness of promotion and financial expenditures.

## **2. GENERAL FEATURES OF VELEBIT NATURE PARK**

The Velebit Nature Park was proclaimed on 29 May 1981 based on the Act on Proclaiming the Velebit Range a Nature Park (National Gazette 24/81). As early as 1978, UNESCO declared the Velebit range an international biosphere reserve as part of a scientific program, the logo of which is a bear cub.

### **2.1. Territory of Velebit Nature Park**

The park covers an area of 2,200 km<sup>2</sup>. The Velebit (145 km) is Croatia's longest and most interesting mountain range. The most valuable parts of northern and central Velebit are protected in the category of strict and special reserves. This is the Northern Velebit National Park, while the Paklenica National Park dominates the range's southern part.

The Velebit range is divided into a *northern, central, southern and southeastern* part. This division is based on its natural geographical and relief features. (Pelivan 2003, 8)

The Velebit NP covers most of the Velebit range and Zrmanja River valley, and it is the largest protected nature area in Croatia. Parts of the Park are protected as national parks. These are the Northern Velebit National Park and the Paklenica National Park. A national park is just one of the forms of protection that legislation recognises, and it is the most popular category of protection.

For an area to be declared a national park, it must be a substantially large area of exceptional natural quality that meets the following conditions: (Bralic 2005, 10)

- Nature must be preserved in its original features or features that have undergone only minor change through human usage.
- It must possess multiple natural phenomena, that is, it is not enough to have only botanical or geomorphological features, because these are covered in other categories of protection.

For many areas, and even countries, national parks have become part of their identity, an essential part of their image and their "signature". The culture of a people is reflected in the way the use of parks is protected and how parks are presented, that is, in the overall way they relate to national parks.

## 2.2. Tourist Traffic of Velebit Nature Park

Because of its large size, the Velebit NP has more than just one entrance and exit, making it difficult to keep records of all visitors. Although there are visitor books, on a dozen peaks, in which visitors can register, this is hardly the best way of record keeping, as visitors cannot be forced to register. In the next section, the tourist traffic of the Velebit NP is shown through the tourist traffic of the Northern Velebit and the Paklenica National Parks.

### 2.2.1. Northern Velebit National Park

Today, this national park has only one official entrance where visitors can buy tickets and get information. 9,370 tickets were sold in 2006. The actual number of visitors is considered to be higher, as it is not possible to control other entrances. Of the total number of visitors in 2006 (96%), most were domestic (73%), due to organised group visits from July to October. Foreign visitors generally visit in the high season. (Table 1)

**Table 1.** Visitor numbers and structure in 2006

2006	No Visitors			Structure	
	Tickets	Free	Total	Domestic	Foreign
January	-	-	-	-	-
February	-	-	-	-	-
March	-	-	-	-	-
April	-	-	-	-	-
May	223	-	223	182	41
June	1,524	219	1,743	1,231	512
July	2,070	59	2,129	1,388	741
August	2,007	46	2,053	1,323	730
September	2,044	19	2,063	1,545	518
October	1,488	11	1,499	1,400	99
November	14	-	14	6	8
December	-	-	-	-	-
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>9,370</b>	<b>354</b>	<b>9,724</b>	<b>7,075</b>	<b>2,649</b>
<b>%</b>	<b>96.36</b>	<b>3.64</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>72.76</b>	<b>27.24</b>

Source: Business documentation of Velebit Nature Park

The data in Table 2 show that, of the total tickets sold in 2007 (94%), 69 % and 31% were sold to domestic and foreign visitors, respectively. The season lasted somewhat longer, probably due to a mild winter and favourable weather conditions. Being located in a rainy region with winter temperatures going down to minus 6°C, the Northern Velebit NP is visited six months in average.

**Table 2.** Visitor numbers and structure in 2007

2007	No Visitors			Structure	
	Tickets	Free	Total	Domestic	Foreign
January	-	-	-	-	-
February	-	-	-	-	-
March	-	-	-	-	-
April	222	10	232	213	19
May	1,297	87	1,384	964	420
June	2,831	358	3,189	2,439	750
July	1,766	20	1,786	1,244	542
August	2,133	86	2,219	1,238	981
September	2,109	134	2,243	1,400	843
October	801	18	819	727	92
November	2	35	37	37	-
December	-	-	-	-	-
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>11,161</b>	<b>748</b>	<b>11,909</b>	<b>8,262</b>	<b>3,647</b>
<b>%</b>	<b>93.72</b>	<b>6.28</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>69.38</b>	<b>30.62</b>

Source: Business documentation of Velebit Nature Park

The tables show that the number of visitors is slow in growing, with domestic visitors continuing to outnumber foreign visitors. Domestic visitors account for 73% and foreign visitors for 27%, indicating a need to intensify marketing activities and market research. It is evident that in 2007 the number of foreign visitors increased by 4% in comparison to 2006. The reason for such a low number of foreign visitors could be the fact that, being Croatia's youngest national park, it is perhaps less accessible and less known.

Most visited are the Zavizan area, the Velebit Botanical Garden, the Premuzic Trail and Stirovaca. Visitors usually arrive in organised groups, among which there are many pilgrims, mountain climbers, scientists and residents. This is perhaps the reason why domestic visitors prevail. They are more familiar with the region and are faster in conveying their experiences to others. Action is required in promoting the national park abroad.

### **2.2.2. Paklenica National Park**

At present, this park has two entrances: the main entrance at the beginning of the Velika Paklenica canyon and another one at Mala Paklenica, with all-day reception service.

The table 3 demonstrates the prevalence of foreign visitors (85%) in the June-September period. Domestic visitors account for only 15%, mainly in May and June. Many are mountain climbers, rock climbers, hikers, as well as school children and students on excursions.

**Table 3.** Visitor numbers and structure in 2006

2006	No Visitors			Structure	
	Tickets	Free	Total	Domestic	Foreign
January	202	196	398	370	28
February	153	113	266	225	41
March	614	186	800	428	372
April	7,161	670	7,831	2,330	5,501
May	11,595	657	12,252	3,025	9,227
June	12,633	366	12,999	2,415	10,584
July	17,979	443	18,422	1,087	17,335
August	25,594	465	26,059	1,652	24,407
September	14,668	334	15,002	1,241	13,761
October	7,512	665	8,177	1,416	6,761
November	1,171	181	1,352	652	700
December	330	183	513	344	169
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>99,612</b>	<b>4,459</b>	<b>104,071</b>	<b>15,185</b>	<b>88,886</b>
%	<b>95.72</b>	<b>4.28</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>14.59</b>	<b>85.41</b>

Source: Business documentation of Velebit Nature Park

A small increase in foreign visitors (876%) and a slight drop in domestic visitors (14%) are evident. About 87% of all visitors come to the park individually as hikers or climbers, and about 13% in organised groups. (Table 4)

**Table 4.** Visitor numbers and structure in 2007

2007	No Visitors			Structure	
	Tickets	Free	Total	Domestic	Foreign
January	331	258	589	549	40
February	260	177	437	322	115
March	1,189	266	1,455	781	674
April	11,881	857	12,738	4,126	8,612
May	11,085	539	11,624	1,669	9,955
June	12,472	345	12,817	1,997	10,820
July	18,973	371	19,344	1,108	18,236
August	26,931	499	27,430	1,392	26,038
September	13,920	331	14,251	1,322	12,929
October	6,660	291	6,951	1,409	5,542
November	2,101	196	2,297	568	1,729
December	220	185	405	307	98
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>106,023</b>	<b>4,315</b>	<b>110,338</b>	<b>15,550</b>	<b>94,788</b>
%	<b>96.09</b>	<b>3.91</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>14.09</b>	<b>85.91</b>

Source: Business documentation of Velebit Nature Park

Having a more favourable position relative to the Northern Velebit NP and being exposed to sub-Mediterranean, continental and mountain climates, the Paklenica NP can be visited all year round. Visitor data from 2006 and 2007 indicate that attendance is the lowest in February when temperatures are around 7°C, and the highest for both domestic and foreign visitors in August when temperatures reach up to 26°C.

The data show an increase in the number of foreign visitors in 2007 (86%) relative to 2006 (85%) resulting from favourable weather conditions.

Also, the Paklenica NP is more accessible by visitors who are in transit, enabling them to combine visits to the park with a day at the beach, thus impacting on the park's visitor statistics. This is perhaps the main reason why the Paklenica NP receives more visits from foreign guests than the Northern Velebit NP.

The above tables illustrate the total annual number of visitors the Northern Velebit NP and the Paklenica NP, visitor patterns per months and the ratio of domestic to foreign visitors. Interestingly, in 2006 and 2007, foreign tourists accounted for 86% of visitors to the Paklenica NP, but only for 31% of visitors to the Northern Velebit NP, that is, the former is mostly frequented by foreign guests – arriving mainly from the neighbouring countries of Italy, Hungary and Slovenia, but also from the Czech Republic, Germany, France and Belgium – and the latter by domestic guests.

### **3. MARKETING APPLICATION IN VELEBIT NATURE PARK**

Once a management plan has been adopted, the application of a marketing concept will become indispensable, helping to bring about improvements in all areas and levels of Park operations. The problem is the Institution's failure to apply specific research methods and techniques of the market research. The interview method is applied to a certain extent. One-on-one interviews are generally conducted by telephone. The Institution receives most of its enquiries by e-mail from tourists and travel agencies, providing it with an opportunity to exchange information, comments and suggestions.

#### **3.1. Tourist Offer of Velebit Nature Park**

Apart from the two national parks that are a part of the Velebit Nature Park, there are numerous other places to visit, the beauty of which is a match to that of the national parks. In addition to nature viewing, bicycling along the many biking routes, the total length of which exceed 80 kilometres, is also popular.

During the winter, skiing and sledding is possible on the reconstructed ski trails of Krasno. There are also plans to open a trail for cross-country skiing.

Covered in dense spruce forests, *Stirovaca* is location of great appeal. It is one of the few Park locations with a water spring and countless little streams that irrigate the surrounding meadows. Close by is the primordial forest of *Klepina Duliba*, a forest reserve.



The park provides opportunities for sports fishing, hiking, mountain climbing and rafting. Visitors who are less keen on activity holidays may visit the *Cerovacke Caves*, the *Zavratica Cove* or the *Terzerijana Instructive Trail*.

A web of natural circumstances has created a diversity of habitats for a large number of animal and plant endems and relicts of Croatia and the Velebit. Of great importance are the Park's many endemic plants such as the Velebit *Degenia*, the Croatian *Sibbirhaea*, the *Edelweiss*, the Croatian Sand Rock cress, the Window Bellflower, *Kitabeli's Primrose*, the Croatian Grassy Bell, the Alpine Sea Holly and others. Diversity also marks the fauna of the Velebit, which display Mediterranean features in the Park's maritime region; Central European features, in the Lika region; and mountain and alpine features, on the Park's peaks. Most numerous among endems are molluscs, butterflies, beetles, and cave insects, in general.

It should be noted that the areas neighbouring on the Nature Park are rather underdeveloped. Social and economic backwardness has caused the population to emigrate, resulting in the areas' depopulation. Also, traffic infrastructure is rather lacking. This calls for measures to be taken in revitalising this region.

In the Velebit's northern part, Krasno stands out as an atypically wealthy Croatian village, but also as a tourist, spiritual and cultural centre. Most of the villagers are employed. The village has a cheese factory, as well as the only Museum of Forestry in Croatia, ski trails, a post office, shops, a hotel and several small catering facilities. Lodging can also be found in the towns of Sveti Jurja, Jablanac and Senj.

Within the Northern Velebit National Park, accommodation is provided in mountain lodges and shelters. Accommodation facilities are modest, furnished with supplies as per demand, and have a poor gastronomic offering. The better-known accommodation facilities include the mountain lodges in *Ravni Dabar* with 50 beds, on *Mt. Zvizan* with 28 beds, and the *Prpa* lodge with 30 beds; the mountain lodges at *Alan Pass* with 40 beds, in *Oltari* with 30 beds, and the *Vila Velebita* with 24 beds; the mountain shelter *Rossi's Cabin* with 10 beds, *Tatek's Cabin* with 12 beds; and many others.

There are only two, elderly people who are permanent residents in the Paklenica National Park; all other villages have been abandoned. Tourism is developed only along the coast where accommodation can be found in hotels, holiday flats, private rooms, guesthouses, and motor camps. Efforts are being made to develop rural tourism; well known is the Varos Homestead.

In the Paklenica National Park, accommodation can be found at the Paklenica Lodge (45 beds), in the mountain shelters of Struga, Ivina Vodica and Vlaski Grad, as well as in private family homes in Ramici and Parici. Shelters are not intended for prolonged visits but rather for overnight stays for visitors on trekking tours or as a refuge from bad weather.

Camping, setting up tents or building a fire is prohibited within both National Parks. Camping is allowed only at the "Nacionalni Park" Motor camp that operates as part of the information and presentation centre of the Paklenica National Park.

Visitors mostly arrive by bus in organised groups, and they are usually school children and students on excursions, pensioners, employees on a company day trip, and pilgrims. For anyone keen on spending their leisure time actively outdoors, the Park provides for a variety of opportunities, including hiking, mountain climbing, bicycling or visiting sanctuaries.

The mountain-climbing opportunities that the Nature Park provides are countless and diverse. The Park's characteristics include an abundance of karst forms, contrasts, slopes, a unique blend of land and sea, botanical and zoological rarities, numerous entrances that are easily accessible, 500 kilometres of forest roads, some 20 accommodation facilities, a well-marked mountain route along the length of the Velebit range, and the popular Premuzic Trail leading through the northern and central part of the Velebit with exceptional views of the sea from a bird's-eye view. In the central part of the Velebit, the locality Ravni Dabar is well known as a mountain-climbing zone in which free climbing is allowed on the cliffs of Visibaba, Agin Kuk, Celina Kuk and Rujicin Kuk.

Recreational fishing in the Velebit Nature Park is allowed on the Ricica, Opsenica and Zrmanja rivers, and on the Sveti Rok, Stikada and Muskovci lakes

### **3.2. Pricing Policy and Sales**

*Prices* of services provided in the Velebit Nature Park are set based on the prices of services in other nature parks, both in Croatia and abroad. In pricing certain type of tickets, the prices set by rival parks are also taken into consideration.

Ticket prices also depend upon a trail's level of difficulty and the duration of time for which a guide is needed. Special attention is focused on pricing tickets for cave visits; in pricing, consideration is given to and comparisons made with the prices of other parks.

For example, a basic three-day ticket to the Northern Velebit National Park costs HRK 30. Tickets are marked with upper-case letters of the alphabet. The basic ticket is a *B ticket*. An *A ticket* is a discounted ticket for children, the disabled and members of alpine clubs, and costs HRK 15. A *G ticket* is for groups and costs HRK 20. An annual ticket, the *F ticket* costing HRK 100, and can be used throughout the year. A discounted annual ticket for the above-mentioned categories – an *E ticket* – costs HRK 50. A seven-day *D ticket* at full price costs HRK 50. A discounted seven-day ticket is a *C ticket* (HRK 25). Free-of-charge tickets are *H tickets*.

### **3.3. Promotional Activities on the Tourist Market**

The efforts the Park's employees make in developing promotional activities are great, because they must do everything by themselves. In the pre-season, they submit promotional material to tourist fairs or attend the fairs in person, and they advertise through the Croatian National Tourist Board.

Promotional printed matter includes leaflets describing various events or seasonal programs, and featuring prices, opening hours, etc. Leaflets are supplied to hotels, Info-Points and travel agencies in the Zadar, Sibenik and Kvarner regions. The

same applies to brochures. Magazines are also important, as they leave a better and enhanced impression on people. Billboards are set up in tourist resorts; town maps, at petrol stations and highway exits. During the summer, they collaborate with travel agencies that promote the Park on posters. Postcards play a minor role in promotion. In addition to Internet links, the Park also has a banner that enables immediate access the Park's Homepage.

Promotional activities occasionally include advertising in newspapers and on tourist pages (the History of Judaism). In the future, promotional movies or video projections are expected to take on a leading role. Radio and television advertising is not used, as it requires considerably greater financial resources.

In addition to seeking to attract visitors and sell services, the Park's employees are making great efforts to position their services and product in the *minds* of children and adults. When visitors come to the Park with the intention of visiting a specific locality, the Park's employees endeavour to provide more information than is normally required to ensure visitors gain the best impression. They also carry out educational programs in local schools to acquaint children with the natural and cultural assets of the region in which they live. Also popular is the one-day School in the Outdoors, bringing children closer to nature through their active participation, instilling in them concern for and responsible behaviour towards nature, and teaching them about natural assets. On the occasion of Environmental Protection Day, World Planet Day, World Park Day and World Mountain Day, they organise expert lectures on climate changes and its impact, as well as various workshops. They underline the importance of preserving nature and encouraging tourism development.

## CONCLUSION

It should be noted that the Velebit Nature Park is mostly located within the territory of the Licko-Senjska County, which, although possessing valuable natural sites, lags behind the other counties in terms of tourism and traffic development. This has had its effect on the Park's attendance rate.

Accommodation facilities are one of the Park's problems. Park visitors are usually people on a one-day trip and mountain climbers staying for a short time. The future construction of accommodation facilities should focus on small guesthouses and family-run hotels that are consistent with trends in tourism to prevent the devastation of outdoor spaces.

Encouragement should be given to developing traditional agriculture and motivating local communities to ensure a better quality of life for residents and the level of standard that tourists require.

The Velebit Nature Park abounds in natural and cultural assets. It has numerous types of plants, animals, forests, trails, cliffs, etc. It is a place where visitors can enjoy themselves. The Park seeks to capitalise on all its assets; it maintains them and invites visitors to come and enjoy them. However, the Park also has some drawbacks: it lacks facilities and services geared to children, a wider selection of souvenirs, indigenous homemade food, multilingual signs, and trails that can be accessed by the disabled.

In addition to cultural, recreational and adventure activities mentioned, the Park could also organise horse riding and paragliding, and make several more caves accessible to visitors. Depending on the offering, the price of tickets would be sure to increase. At present, prices are realistic and affordable, and there is no need for in-depth analysis of the pricing policy.

Data regarding the number of tourist overnights indicates an increase in attendance rates. There is a large discrepancy in the ratio of domestic to foreign visitors between the two national parks. Park authorities need to uncover the reason for this and find ways of evening out attendance rates. Greater collaboration is needed with local tourist boards and the Tourist Board of the Licko-Senjska County, to ensure that the Park has more frequent and easier access to leading tourist fairs.

Local hospitality facilities, as well as bus and train stations in the extended area, should be supplied with promotional printed matter. In addition to posters, billboards, neon signs, banners, etc. could also be used. Seeing how television advertising calls for considerable financial resources, video films could be used as a convincing substitute. Organising the celebration of anniversaries in honour of renowned scientists who have contributed towards the Park's development in the past would make for interesting events.

Hence, to improve the operations of the Velebit Nature Park and enhance its future development and competitiveness, it is necessary to apply marketing activities.

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