

29th April 1998

## RESEARCH

# VISITOR INFORMATION GATHERING BEHAVIOUR

## A Review of Current Academic Research

### Introduction

While intuition and findings gathered from visitor surveys indicates that tourists on holiday gather information from the local environment that significantly dictates how they allocate their time and resources in that local environment, theory and models to understand this process are just emerging from tourism marketing research.

A recent review of the academic literature on the subject follows. A summary of several pertinent, and perhaps not-so-pertinent, research papers follows. Detailed results of surveys incorporated in the papers are not discussed, as these can be extracted from the articles if required. Instead, emphasis is on general findings with specific emphasis on those that may have market implications and best serve to illustrate tourist information gathering behaviour as it is currently understood.

### **Title: Beacons of Light in an Expanding Universe: An Assessment of State-of-the-Art in Tourism Marketing/Marketing Research**

J R Brent-Ritchie, *The Journal of Tourism Marketing* Vol. 5 (4) 1995, The Haworth Press Inc; pp 49–79

### Subject of the Paper

This paper attempts to give a complete overview or snapshot of the current state of tourism marketing research. The paper has 4 main components:

1. An analytical look at areas where progress has been made in recent years;
2. An identification of areas where there are significant shortcomings in understanding of the field or research;
3. A global assessment of the positive dimensions of the field;
4. An attempts to identify emerging issues and to suggest methods of resolution.

### Method of Research

An analytical and subjective review/grouping of research done over the years and its division into the following topics:

- Tourism marketing/marketing management
- Market segmentation
- Travel motivation
- Models of decision making/choice behaviour in tourism
- Information acquisition and processing
- Macro level or aggregate tourism statistics
- Scaling and attitude/perception measurement
- Destination image measurement
- Analysis and forecasting of tourism demand
- Events and Attractions
- Advertising and communications effectiveness

## Principal Findings

- Tourism research to date has been driven by a strong marketing orientation. Literature dealing with functional aspects of the industry, such as finance or human resource management is lacking.
- Because of obvious commercial opportunities, market segmentation has been a recurring theme. New, 'flavour of the month' applications and techniques are a problem, however, as there is no coherent model behind the themes.
- Travel motivations are understood in a good general way but have yet to be explored in depth with regard to specific markets.
- Decision making models have emphasised an incremental and sequential learning perspective based on cognition and rational cost/benefit evaluation, which is consistent with the larger body of consumer research.
- Studies on information gathering and processing are scarce and tend to focus on sources and behaviour as opposed to cognitive processes. Destination-naïve travellers gather different information from different sources than do travellers experienced with the destination.
- Macro level statistics are professionally gathered and understood by most important tourism nations.
- Scaling and attitude/perception measurement has been widely applied over the years to specific market segments, yielding significantly different results between segments.
- Destination image measurement has revealed that destination image is a complex multi-dimensional phenomenon. While techniques exist to measure it effectively, there is not yet a way of understanding its role in consumer destination choice.
- Analysing and forecasting tourism demand is sophisticated and mature, yielding generally accurate results.
- The role of event and attractions as tourism generators is well understood.
- Advertising effectiveness in tourism is a new field but significant understanding in how to improve the effectiveness of various tourism communications has been achieved.

## Ongoing problems

- The often fatal assumption of rationality by the consumer.
- The confusion in conducting clear empirical studies. Terms and concepts are often confused.
- The lack of understanding of the dynamics of information processing, especially with regard to 'perceived risk' as a motivating factor. Perception of information is both selective and subjective, leading to 'felt involvement'.
- The 'goods' bias of the industry which treats the major purchase decision as key, but neglects the cumulative quality factor of the during-visit experience, and the post-visit integration of the experience which influences future tourism behaviour.
- Distribution channels are not currently understood although their importance is vast.

## Global assessment of academic tourism research

- Growth of tourism is creating demand for research.
- Quality journals exist to diffuse research.
- Tourism is now perceived as a 'respectable' industry, worthy of study.
- Teaching and research texts are in place, as are necessary communication networks.

## Emerging challenges

- New major players have emerged from private industry such as the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) and the World Tourism Organisation (WTO).
- Academic framework could be strengthened.
- Market Economy is dictating results driven work instead of pure research.

## Responding to the challenges

- A global tourism consortium is needed.
- A multidisciplinary world tourism research centre is needed.
- A global research agenda is required, leading to cross-cultural and comparative research.

### **Title: Tourist Information Search**

Dale Fodness and Brian Murray, *Annals of Tourism Research* 1997, Elsevier Science Limited; pp 503–523.

#### Subject of the paper

Is it appropriate to segment the leisure tourism market on the basis of consumer information search behaviours?

#### Method of research

Car tourists stopping at official Florida tourism information centers were mailed a survey on their information search behaviours. 585 suitable returned surveys were analysed.

#### Principal findings

- It is appropriate to segment the market based on information gathering behaviours.
- Without exception, those who spent more time and effort gathering information, spent more money on the vacation, and did more.
- Active information gatherers planned their trip further in advance and consulted more sources than did passive information gatherers.
- VFR (visiting friends and relatives) tourists did the least amount of research and had the smallest expenditure.
- Time limited information gatherers tended to consult more sources but resembled VFRs in their expenditure pattern.
- Source-limited information gatherers usually planned further out and often used interpersonal information sources.
- Those with children under 2 years of age were the most aggressive information gatherers.

### **Title: Communication Strategies to Reach First Time Visitors**

Christine A. Vogt, Susan I. Stewart, Daniel R. Fesenmaier, *The Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, Vol 7 (2) 1998, The Haworth Press Inc; pp 69-87.

#### Subject of the paper

An investigation of where potential tourists would look for information about a destination they had never visited before, in addition to traditional information sources, such as advice from family and friends, newspapers, and magazines.

#### Method of research

Using responses to a newspaper advertisement run by a Midwest American State in a dozen large urban markets within travelling distance of that State, the information gathering behaviour of 515 consumers who had never visited the State before was examined.

#### Principal findings

- Major new finding was that potential first time visitors relied heavily on their own travel files to plan their trip. Those travellers with their own travel files were experienced travellers with strong intentions to take the trip.
- Friends and family members were also often consulted.
- Magazines, newspapers, and tourism information centers were consulted less frequently.
- While a destination may attempt to control the information dissemination process, the consumer actually is in control because of their selection, either passively, or aggressively, of the information they receive.
- The best way a destination has of ensuring positive information is to ensure that tourists have a positive experience during their stay.
- A theoretical model of information gathering behaviour, incorporating the role of the personal travel file is presented.
- In order to facilitate information being added to personal consumer files, the information should be:
  - Easily retained and small enough to be easily packed for the trip.

- Provide thorough information, including business hours, costs, itineraries, and maps.
- Include addresses and phone numbers of other information sources.
- Have a valid date on the publication.
- Include a message that encourages the consumer to retain the package.

### **Title: Destination Marketing: Measuring the Effectiveness of Brochures**

Zongqing Zhou, *The Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing* Vol 6 (3-4) 1998, The Haworth Press Inc; pp 143–158

#### Subject of the paper

The results of an exploratory study defining effectiveness for assessing the impacts of brochures.

#### Method of research

2400 people who had requested information and received a brochure on Frankenmuth Michigan by return mail were surveyed to test three hypothesis:

1. The more respondents use brochures, the more likely they are to report a higher level of trip satisfaction.
2. Brochures are more likely to have an impact on those who have not visited the destination than on those with prior experience, in terms of influencing the trip decision.
3. There exists a significant linear relationship between effectiveness of brochures and the independent variables, including: prior experience, income, perceived usefulness of information contained in brochures, whether or not respondents spent a night in the study area, and age.

#### Principal findings

- The brochure was useful in increasing interest in the destination, but had only a minimal effect on increasing expenditure by tourists at the destination.
- A majority of respondents used the brochure as an information source while at the destination. Those who used the brochure in this fashion were more likely to recommend the destination to others.
- Respondents unfamiliar with the destination used the brochure more, thus proving hypothesis H2.
- The more useful the brochure was perceived to be, the more likely it was to influence the decision to visit the destination.
- Age, income and overnight staying were not significantly related to the effectiveness of the brochure, but prior experience and perceived usefulness of the brochure were, thus half proving H3.
- Almost everyone requesting the brochure, read it, whether they visited the destination or not.
- Respondents who consulted the brochure reported a better than expected trip.

Marketing recommendations flowing from this study are that it is important to make brochures useful at the destination by including pertinent information and maps, and that it is important to respond to brochure requests because the brochures are read, and brochures are solicited before the destination decision is made.

### **Title: Growing in Sophistication: The Application of Geographical Information Systems in Post Modern Tourism Marketing**

Martin P. Elliott-White and Mick Finn, *The Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing* Vol 7 (1) 1998, The Haworth Press Inc; pp 65–80.

#### Subject of the paper

Societal change is fragmenting the tourism marketplace in the United Kingdom and elsewhere into lifestyle and relationship segments, requiring new marketing techniques and associated technologies. Geographical information systems provide a range of appropriate and useful tools for tourism marketing managers in the UK.

#### Method of research

This paper is analytical and theoretical and discusses a wide range of marketing issues across a general tourism framework attempting to provide an overview, with special emphasis on geographical information systems.

## Principal findings

- As tourism broadens its reach throughout society, the tourism market is dynamically evolving into market segments, often driven by lifestyle perceptions and the individual's striving for the unique.
- At the same time, technology is speeding up the marketing cycle, reducing costs, and increasing competitiveness, to the point that information and the manipulation of it is a strategic weapon.
- GIS has been used for some time in the UK by retail businesses, using data bases and census data related to post codes to create geodemographic analysis allowing access to particular market segments, based on the principle that people with similar profiles live in the same area.
- GIS is useful in corporate decision making:
  - operationally in locating the nearest suppliers, managing distribution networks, credit ratings, and direct mailing.
  - tactically in competitor analysis, market research, target marketing, promotion, cross selling opportunities, and customer profiling.
- GIS is useful strategically in facility location, forecasting, marketing strategies and performance evaluation.
- Tourism is well placed to take advantage of GIS because each transaction results in a useful data base entry, although a barrier is created because of the hierarchical agent basis of the industry, which makes data base sharing a sensitive area.
- Problems with GIS involve often out-of-date information, and the micro fragmentation of segments into a complex mosaic of niche markets.
- As well, lifestyle segmentation often cuts across socio-economic classes, which means there is a need to move from spatially based systems to individually based systems.
- A possible solution is to merge GIS and lifestyle data and analysis, but the sophistication of the systems required and the cost are usually prohibitive.
- Tourism has been in the forefront of relationship marketing based on customer loyalty programs using direct marketing.
- A difficulty is that because the wide variety of products available, repeat destination sales are rare. Integration of GIS, lifestyle and relationship marketing should enable the sale of similar yet different destinations and/or products to consumers.
- The way ahead for tourism companies is to combine the emerging technologies and segmentation strategies to form long term relationships with individual consumers.

## **Title: GIS Applications in Tourism Marketing: Current Uses, an Experimental Application and Future Prospects**

Stefania Bertazzon, Geoffrey Crouch, Dianne Draper, and Nigel Waters, *The Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing* Vol 6 (3-4) 1995, The Haworth Press Inc; pp 35-57

## Subject of the paper

A discussion of tourism based GIS.

## Method of research

First the technology and theory of GIS is examined. Then an application using the Internet to incorporate GIS-based models as a marketing tool for a ski resort destination is discussed and further developments for the technology are described.

## Principal findings

- Geographical Information Systems are defined as computer based systems for storing, manipulating, and displaying spatial data.
- Tourism based GIS have been rare, although marketing based GIS has been common. The thrust of the paper is that GIS can be used to market tourism product.
- The Internet is a perfect way to market ski destinations using GIS.
- GIS can be used to enable ski resorts to maximise consumer opportunities at the resorts and also to enable consumers to find information quickly on prices and other information through the Internet.
- GIS can be linked to databases to produce market mapping, which can then be used to target marketing investments and direct marketing initiatives.
- GIS is also useful in market research as to where to locate tourism facilities and for planners to forecast future demand and move to meet it.

- GIS internet applications, pioneered in the Alberta Ski Industry site, enable viewers to spatially comprehend the terrain of the ski hills as well as the geographical relationship of one mountain to another, thus assisting them in planning a holiday visiting several resorts. As well, real time information on road conditions, ski conditions and weather, made the site useful to those planning or commencing a visit to the resorts.

### **Title: Positioning the Destination Product – Can Regional Tourism Boards Learn From Private Sector Practice?**

Philip Alford, *The Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing* Vol. 7 (2) 1998, The Haworth Press Inc; pp 51–67

#### Subject of the paper

To examine the role of positioning in the marketing of a tourism destination.

Method: An examination of regional tourist board positioning of short-break holiday opportunities in the UK through brochure offerings as a framework for analysis, followed by a comparison with private industry approaches.

#### Principal findings

- Market analysis, internal analysis, and competitor analysis achieve positioning strategy. Positioning involves developing and communicating key product attributes based on competitive advantage.
- A realistic knowledge of competitive advantage will indicate which market segments to target with which products.
- Positioning a destination involves intangibility and inseparability, which is the lack of ability to test the product before placing it on the market. As well the consumer controls the purchase because they participate in the product as much or as little as they wish, so that two consumers of an identical package may have entirely different experiences.
- Recent surveys by the English Tourist Board revealed that the Regional Tourist Boards were out of touch and unable to identify consumer benefits.
- Surveys revealed that holidaymakers were most likely to be influenced by a type of holiday or activity, while RTBs mainly marketed towns or regions. Private operators, on the other hand, created brochures that sold activities or theme holidays that actually facilitated consumer choice.
- The reason for the geographical approach by the RTBs is their funding and mandates.
- Hotels and Tour Companies have recognized the need to have different offering and have branded specific products to appeal to specific market segments.
- RTBs need to analyze their data basis and from that information create competitive brands, from which will emerge competitive product and image.
- Unfortunately the organizational structure, political mandates, and corporate culture, make this difficult to achieve

### **Title: Evaluating the Economic Impact of Travel Information Provided at Indiana Welcome Centers**

Daniel R. Fesenmaier and Christine A. Vogt, *Journal of Travel Research* Winter 1993, University of Colorado; pp 33–39.

#### Subject of the paper

An evaluation of the effectiveness of travel information provided at Indiana state operated welcome centers in modifying travel behaviours, specifically with regard to extending the length of the visit, selection of alternate attractions, and incremental expenditures produced by longer visits or visiting different places.

#### Method of research

595 people stopping at welcome centers were interviewed on site and then later filled out a detailed questionnaire.

## Principal findings

- Previous studies have revealed that there are no significant differences between those who stop at information centers and those who do not.
- Analysis of the surveys revealed that most of those stopping did so initially to use the toilet. Only 10% stopped specifically for information.
- Regardless, a significant majority of those stopping obtained information.
- Maps and attraction information were most requested. Accommodation, shopping, and events information were least in demand.
- Most people had prior knowledge of the state. While less than half acquired information prior to departure, most were gathering information during their trip.
- Most people stopping were on relatively long journeys of over a week.
- A third of those stopping spent more money in the state as a result of their information gathering. The incremental expenditure was on shopping, food, and lodging, respectively.
- 20% stayed longer than planned and 30% visited areas not anticipated directly as a result of the information received.

### **Title: A Comparison Between Welcome Center Visitors and General Highway Auto Travellers**

William P. Stewart, ChiChuan Lue, Daniel R. Fesenmaier, and B. Scott Anderson, *Journal of Travel Research* Winter 1993, University of Colorado; pp 40–45.

#### Subject of the Paper

A comparative study to examine differences, if any, between those stopping for information at state welcome centers and those who drove by, in order to see if current research on the benefits of welcome centers is biased.

#### Method of research

2500 people who stopped at information centers in Texas and 2500 who drove by were compared.

#### Principal findings

- Those stopping were more likely to reside further away, they were older, drove more within Texas, had higher expenditures per party, had planned their trip further in advance, and were more likely to be on holiday.
- Therefore welcome centre visitors are not representative of general highway travellers.

### **Title: Investigating the Influence of Welcome Center Information on Travel Behaviour**

Daniel R. Fesenmaier, Christine A. Vogt, and William P. Stewart, *Journal of Travel Research* Winter 1993, University of Colorado; pp 47–51.

#### Subject of the paper

While it is well known that welcome centers are an important part of the destination marketing mix, little is known about the degree to which information provided actually influences visitor behaviour. This paper looks at this issue.

#### Method of research

395 visitors who stopped at welcome centers were surveyed to determine how the information they obtained influenced their behaviour.

#### Principal findings

- Main finding was that information provided influences travel behaviour depending on the nature of the trip to the area and the phase of the trip when the information is obtained.

- The most influenced were those with Indiana as their holiday destination who were gathering information at or near the beginning of their holiday.
- Most travellers said they would use the information to plan future visits, while relatively few were influenced to lengthen their stay.
- Highly influenced travellers were likely to be information gatherers, collecting information before and during their journey.
- Middle income earners tended to be more influenced than low or high earners.
- In transit travellers will gather information to use on a future visit to the destination.

**Title: The Influence of State Traveller Information Centers on Tourist Length of Stay and Expenditures**

Patrick T. Tierney, Journal of Travel Research Winter 1993, University of Colorado; pp 28–32.

Subject of the paper

An examination of the influence of travel information centers on influencing tourism behaviour.

Method of research

1,041 people stopping at Colorado information centers were provided with travel diaries to list their expenditures and their background, and 439 were interviewed to provide a control group.

Principal findings

- Because of their design, which emphasised information centers instead of toilets and picnic grounds, the majority of people stopping at Colorado information centers actually stopped for information.
- The majority of those gathering information were influenced by it, most by visiting new areas and attractions and fewer by extending their stay, and thereby increasing expenditures.

**Title: Modelling the Influence of Information Obtained at State Welcome Centers on Visitor Expenditures**

Wesley S. Roehl and Daniel R. Fesenmaier, The Journal of Tourism Marketing Vol. 4 (3) 1995, The Haworth Press Inc; pp 19–27

Subject of the paper

This study models the influence of information obtained at state welcome centers on visitor expenditures.

Method of research

560 people stopping at Indiana welcome centers were surveyed by interview and questionnaire.

Principal findings

- Per day trip expenditures tend to increase with length of stay.
- Trip purpose influenced expenditures. Travellers to specific attractions or events spent more, especially when compared to those visiting family and friends. Visitor expenditures were also lower for travellers transiting the state as opposed to those for whom it was a destination.
- Travel party characteristics do not alter expenditure levels.
- Goal should be to increase the length of stay in order to increase expenditure, but this is the most difficult thing to do.

Jim Embrey April 1998