

Are Travel Agents Market Mavens? A Study on Travel Agencies Located in Izmir, Turkey

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Introduction

Businesses spend billions of dollars in order to market their products and serve their customers as a result of increasing costs of promotional activities in a competitive environment (Clark, 2005: 289-290). With reference to existing literature about word of mouth marketing, three main groups have been indicated (Corey, 1971:51; Schiffman and Kanuk, 2010:292; Silverman, 2001:195). These groups who perform word of marketing are early purchases, opinion leaders and market mavens (Feick and Price, 1987: 83). Early purchases are the customers who buy and use the product they recommend and keep an active communication with other consumers since they have information about the product; however they do not have general information about the market itself (Wiedman et al, 2001: 198). On the other hand, opinion leaders recommend products and services with information they have (Solomon et al, 2006: 374) and they encourage consumers to purchase (Goldsmith et al, 2003: 54). To summarize, early purchasers and opinion leaders influence other consumers with the specific information and expertise they have about products (Feick and Price, 1987: 84). This study is about the third group - market mavens - who are market information providers who affect buying decisions of various consumers seeking advices about a broad variety of products and services (Williams and Slama, 2005:4).

Feick and Price (1987: 85) defined market mavens as “individuals who have information about many kinds of products, places to shop, and other facets of markets, and initiate discussions with consumers and respond to requests from consumers for market information”. Market mavens, as information sources about market characteristics, are individuals who trust their own expertise and opinions and share them with other consumers and additionally give information about shopping (Clark et al., 2008: 240). Geissler and Edison (2005: 76) indicated that market mavens are essential to businesses in order to support marketing communication and have a competitive advantage in the market. Accordingly, the purpose of this research is to figure out whether the front line employees in travel agencies as a significant information source in travel industry are market mavens or not. In addition, the study aims at determining how much travel agency employees have information about the products and they recommend to tourism consumers as these characteristics are stated in the definition of market mavenism concept. Although market mavens are studied extensively in literature by various researchers (Elliott and Warfield, 1993; Williams and Slama, 1995; Clark and Goldsmith, 2005; Yang, 2013), market maven behavior of travel agency employees is a highly ignored issue. Consequently, this study is important in terms of making a contribution to the existing literature.

As consistent with the aim of study, the hypotheses below were formed:

- H1: There is a significant relationship between gender and information giving behavior of travel agency employees.
- H2: There is a significant relationship between gender and recommendation giving behavior of travel agency employees.
- H3: There is correlation between information giving and recommendation giving behavior of travel agency employees.

Methodology

A quantitative study on the employees of travel agencies located in İzmir has been conducted through a structured questionnaire. A survey of 123 representatives from total 160 travel agencies was implemented between the dates of 15 February 2016 – 01 March 2016.

The total 11 items which have been resulted in 2 independent factors are rated on a five-point scale (1=strongly agree; 2=agree; 3=neither agree nor disagree; 4=disagree; 5=strongly disagree). The travel agency employees were requested to rate these statements. The questionnaire consists of four separate sections. The first section was adapted from the original six-item market maven scale (Feick and Price, 1987) and the second and the third sections were adapted from the study of Goodey and East (2008), while the last part of the questionnaire consisted of demographic questions. Before, all the questionnaires were handed out, a pilot study with 45 participants were conducted between the dates of 15 February 2016-20 February 2016. KMO value of pilot validity test is .84 at a significance level of $p < .05$ and Cronbach Alpha value is .86. Then, we continued to collect data from the sample.

First of all, validity and reliability of the study were analyzed and then hypothesis tests were performed. Data were analyzed with SPSS 23.0 (Statistical Program for Social Sciences). Principal Components Analysis was used in order to define structure of factors and the reliability of data gathered was tested with Cronbach's Alpha.

Findings

In this part, the results of frequency analysis, factor analysis, reliability analysis, independent sample t-test, ANOVA Test will be explained. Additionally, the responses given to the open ended questions in third section of the questionnaire were analyzed with content analysis and frequencies have been explained accordingly.

The sample profile has been shown in detail in the following table (Table 1.0). Most of the respondents are between the ages of 25-34 and female (64%). Almost all of the respondents (84%) had finished university or graduate schools. While 66% of the participants have been working in tourism sector for 6 and above years, most of them have been working in the firms for 0-2 years (36%) or 6 years and above (35%). 66,4% of the employees have been working in tourism sector for 6 years and above.

Table 1.0: Numerical and Percentage Dispersion of Sample Profile

	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Age		
18-24	11	9.3
25-34	63	53.0
35-44	38	32.0
45 and above	9	6.7
Total	119	100.0
Gender		
Male	42	35.9
Female	75	64.1
Total	117	100.0
Education		
High School	11	9.3
University	100	84.0
Master's & PhD	8	6.7
Total	119	100.0
The Number of Years Worked in the Tourism Sector		
0-2	16	13.4
3-5	24	20.2
6 and above	79	66.4
Total	119	100.0
The Number of Years Worked in Travel Agency		
0-2	43	36.2
3-5	34	28.5
6 and above	42	35.3
Total	119	100.0

The summary results of confirmatory factor analysis are presented in Table 2.0. According to these results, it is found that 10 variables are formed under two factors in which each item loaded on its correct factor and no two items loaded on the same factor. Additionally, two constructs are different but related.

As a result of factor analysis performed on data gathered, KMO (Kaizer-Mayer-Olkin) value is 85% at a significance level of $p < .05$ and Cronbach Alpha value is 91%. Therefore, the reliability of this scale is founded to be high (Nunnally, 1976).

Table 2.0: Results of Factor Analysis

Eigenvalue:3,45; Mean: 4,11; V. Explained:68,93 p<.05	Factors Loadings	
	1	2
<i>Measures</i>		
A1*	0.896	
A2	0.888	
A3	0.809	
A4	0.781	
A5	0.768	
Eigenvalue:3,82; Mean: 4,41; V. Explained:76,36 p<.05		
B1**		0.906
B2		0.886
B3		0.879
B4		0.864
B5		0.832

*Measures from A1 to A5 refer to the sentences about information giving behavior.

** Measures from B1 to B5 refer to the sentences about recommendation giving behavior.

In the study, hypothesis tests were conducted. According to the results of independent samples t-test, there is a significant relationship between gender and information and recommendation giving behavior of travel agencies. Therefore, the hypotheses (H1 and H2) are supported since Sig. values are .025 and .029 at a significance level of $p < .05$. Females were found to be more likely to give information and recommendation about tourism products to consumers. The results are shown in Table 3.0. However, according to the results of ANOVA tests, there is no significant relationship between information and recommendation giving behavior of agents and age, education, working time in the firm and working time in tourism sector.

Table 3.0: Results of Independent Samples T-test Analysis

	Gender	N	Mean		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances (Sig.)	Sig. (2-tailed)
Information	Female	75	4.2613	Equal variances assumed	.000	.008
	Male	42	3.8095	Equal variances not assumed		.025
Recommendation	Female	75	4.5493	Equal variances assumed	.000	.006
	Male	42	4.1429	Equal variances not assumed		.029

Pearson correlation coefficients (Pearson's r) were used to investigate the relationship between the level of information giving and recommendation giving behavior. The results of correlation analysis between two factor attributes are shown on Table 4.0. According to results, there is a moderate positive relationship ($r=.55$; $p<.05$) between information giving behavior and recommendation giving behavior of travel agency employees. H3 is supported here.

Table 4.0: Results of Pearson Correlation Analysis

	Information	Recommendation
Information	1	
Recommendation	,55**	1

**Correlation is at a significance level of $p<.05$ (2-tailed).

The third section of the questionnaire was consisted of open ended questions about the recommendations that travel agency employees give tourism consumers. They give advices to consumers about hotels, destinations and cruises which they mostly experienced themselves. Secondly, they recommend the products and services which they get information through advertisements. Thirdly, front line employees of travel agencies recommend tourism products as per the advice from someone else such as friends, family or other consumers. Table 5.0 explains the detailed information about the recommendations made by travel agents.

Table 5.0: The Information Sources for the Products Recommended by Travel Agents

	Sources	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Hotels	I experienced myself	54	56.3
	Advertisements	18	18.8
	I got advice from someone else	9	9.4
	Other*	15	15.6
Destinations	I experienced myself	65	62.5
	Advertisements	20	19.3
	I got advice from someone else	11	10.6
	Other*	8	7.7
Cruises	I experienced myself	25	48.5
	Advertisements	11	21.1
	I got advice from someone else	8	15.4
	Other*	8	15.4

* Other consists of the responses such as searching through the Internet, info travels organized by the company, through the official website of the company worked.

Travel agents recommend the hotels mostly located in Aegean and Mediterranean parts of Turkey. It is figured out from the responses taken from the question about destinations that travel agents suggests mostly Antalya, Bodrum, Marmaris in Turkey, and European Cities, Maldives, the Far East and the Balkans abroad. In addition, respondents indicated that they only offer cruise companies which their employers have agreement with.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand whether the front line employees of travel agencies are market mavens or not. Our research indicates that travel agents should be accepted as market mavens with their information and recommendation giving behavior about hotels, destinations and cruise tours. Employees working in travel agencies located in Izmir have product knowledge and market expertise. The conclusion of the study reveals that the travel agents are market mavens with their marketplace knowledge and information sharing behavior; however, they are unable to offer tailored services to their consumers due to their strict agreements with other tourism service providers.

Limitations and Future Research

Our study is limited in generalizability and has some shortcomings. According to the website of TURSAB (Association of Turkish Travel Agencies), total of 384 travel agencies are located in Izmir, however some of them were inaccessible due to various reasons such as closure, merging or address changes.

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