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INFORMATION SEARCH BEHAVIORS OF FREE AND INDEPENDENT TRAVELERS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to describe the extent to which visitors to a historic attraction acquired information in their vacation deliberations and the degree to which their trip characteristics could be used to discriminate between levels of active and passive information seekers. In this data set, respondents who sought out and used information in their trip planning significantly differed from their passive counterparts in terms of their travel decision making. Active groups of information seekers tended to evaluate more alternatives, traveled greater distances, and had limited prior experience with the attraction as compared to their more passive counterparts. Findings of this study provide the marketing manager additional insights to define the potential audience for advertising and promotional campaigns. The implications of the findings as they relate to both the marketing message and its distribution are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The communication of information by the marketer and the acquisition of marketing information by the consumer are key elements in the study of tourism. Without information, the consumer cannot act. Without communication, the marketer cannot sell (1).

Between 1985 and 1989, expenditures on media forms of travel advertising in the U. S. increased on average 10 percent annually. Travel advertisement expenditures totaled over one billion dollars for the second consecutive year. Airlines accounted for \$697 million of travel advertising expenditures, followed by cruise lines at \$134 million, domestic destinations at \$101 million, and foreign countries at \$80 million. It should be noted that these expenditures do not account for local and regional cooperative advertising programs and trade papers, nor the production, sales promotion, or public relations costs

associated with promotional campaigns (16).

Most consumers can be expected to seek information from a variety of sources during their vacation decision making. Sources of information available to consumers have generally been organized into four basic categories. They commonly appear in the literature as 1) personal (e.g., friends, relatives), 2) media (e.g., brochures, advertisements in print and electronic media), 3) neutral (travel clubs, travel guides, travel agents), and 4) retailer sources (store visits or contacts) (1, 2, 8). The purpose of this study was to describe the extent to which free and independent travelers acquired information from four (4) alternative sources and the degree to which their trip characteristics can be used to discriminate between levels of active and passive information seekers. Currently, there are very few studies in the research literature that have examined the theorized relations between the extent to which consumers search for information and travel decision making (Table 1). Nolan's (15) study of two non probability samples of resort visitors to Hilton Head, S. C. and visitors to the state of Texas is the notable exception. However, the study's sampling techniques and unreported response rates elicit questions as the generalizability of both studies' findings to the populations from which they are drawn.

This study re-examined several of the factors assumed to discriminate between levels of active and passive information seekers (Table 1). By understanding differences among visitors in terms of their search for and use of information in their vacation deliberations, a travel

business could further refine its marketing message to those most likely to seek and acquire the information.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

The number of vacation destinations a consumer is aware of (let alone the vacation alternatives that actually exist) is likely to be substantial and difficult to evaluate mentally. As a result, the consumer considers only a limited number of these alternatives in planning his or her vacation (21, 22). The concept of the evoked set in the tourism literature is defined as the "Travel destinations of which the consumer is aware and has some likelihood greater than zero of visiting within some time period" (21, p. 7). This set of travel destinations becomes the list of alternatives that the potential traveler has reached positive conclusions on and is most likely to draw from in reaching a purchase decision.

Woodside and Ronkainen (21) found that travelers initially consider a limited range of destinations when planning a vacation trip when compared with purchase decisions involving both durable and non-durable products. Their study of a 400 person sample drawn from a population of 2,200 personal inquiries for travel information about the state of South Carolina revealed an evoked set size of 4 + or -2. To date, there has been little additional research into consumers of travel experiences evoked set to validate their findings by using different sampling frames.

In a review of consumer research on tourism, van Raaij (19) extrapolated

from the findings of Woodside and Sherrell (1977) and theorized a relation between a vacationer's evoked set size and the amount of information acquired. According to van Raaij, the number of vacation alternatives considered by a pleasure traveller is related in a positive fashion to the amount of information acquired in making that vacation purchase decision.

Comparing the size of a vacation traveler's evoked set of destination alternatives with the amount of prepurchase information acquired evolved from findings in the consumer behavior literature. Westbrook and Fornell (20) found that the size of the evoked set of 236 recent purchasers of major household appliances was positively related to the buyers need for information sources. "As the evoked set increased among consumers so too was the use of and reliance on information sources in the prepurchase process" (p. 305).

We propose the following hypothesis:
Ho1: Subjects' information search will be related to the size of their evoked sets. The higher the level of information search, the larger the number of alternatives subjects will seriously consider in their vacation decisions.

Nolan (14, 16) found significant differences between the levels of prepurchase information source use and the length of planning time prior to the travelers' vacation trip. Drawing upon data from a non-probability sample of two groups of tourists (e.g., 626 recent visitors to a vacation resort; 1,105 recent visitors to a state identified through an advertisement conversion study), a chi-

square test revealed an interaction between respondents' level of prepurchase information source use (high; low) and trip planning time. The greater the degree of planning time, the greater the level of information use.

Time availability and its converse, time pressure, has been related to the degree of information search behavior in the consumer behavior literature. Beatty and Smith's (12) study of 407 recent purchasers (within two months) of home electronic appliances from one western U. S. city, found that neutral sources of search were influenced by time availability. This result suggested to the authors that neutral sources search was perceived as time consuming to people and that under time pressure, people may avoid this type of search. According to Bettman (3), time pressure exerts an influence on the degree of control a consumer can have in processing information. The result of such pressure affects search behavior. As time pressure increases, information search behavior decreases. Moore and Lehmann (12) found a significant relationship in their purchase experiment using 120 graduate business students over the course of a six week period. Subjects who were rushed for time were found to acquire significantly less total information before purchases than subjects not rushed. Several researchers have shown that the greater the perceived urgency to purchase a product (e.g. because the currently owned product is broken), the less the information search (4, 5). In addition, Donohew and Tipton (5) pointed out that in many situations information seeking is ended by running out of time, rather than a decision on the part of the consumer as to whether the information

obtained is sufficient.

We propose the following hypothesis:
Ho2: Subjects' information search will be related to the time they spent in trip planning. The higher the level of information search, the greater the planning time of subjects' vacation deliberations.

Nolan (14) found that visitors' prior experience with a state was mildly associated with their information source use during a vacation to Texas. The greater the level of prior visits a subject made to the state, the less information use was reported by respondents.

Moore and Lehmann (12) found that the number of previous purchases of specific brand alternatives significantly and negatively related to information search. The greater the number of previous purchases of a specific brand during the study's six week period, the less information was acquired before purchase. In an earlier study, Newman and Staelin (13) identified 653 households which had purchased either an automobile or major household appliance in the preceding 13 months from a nation-wide probability sample. Subjects who had repeated a purchase of a specific brand sought less information than those that did not, but only when they considered one brand at the outset of their purchase deliberations. Repeat purchasing of a brand did not reduce prepurchase information search for those who initially considered more than one brand.

Perdue and Botkin (17) in their advertisement conversion study postulated that a direct transfer from the literature concerning durable and non-

durable goods can be made to the information search behavior of tourists. As the level of familiarity with a tourist destination increases, the level of prepurchase information seeking decreases.

We propose the following hypothesis:
Ho3: Subjects' information search will be related to the number of times they had previously visited the attraction. The higher the level of information search, the less subjects will be familiar with the attraction.

The number of days a person spends on a vacation is a factor uniquely derived from the travel tourism literature. The factor would have little meaning in situations where the product is a durable or non durable good. However, if one would assume that the purchase of a vacation involves a process of relatively complex decision making (involving perceived risk and choice between alternatives), Assael's (1) model of consumer decision making can be the basis for an hypothesis that trip duration is positively related to the total amount of information acquired.

In complex decision making, the consumer evaluates alternatives in a more detailed and comprehensive manner. Assael (1) theorized that such a process is more likely for high priced products, the product is associated with perceived risks, and/or the product is associated with one's ego. Since a vacation is assumed to be a relatively expensive purchase involving significant amounts of a person's discretionary time (10) and income (7), requires purchase decisions to be made many times on symbolic communications alone (7), and is viewed by most people as an

extension of their personality (11), linkages to Assael's (1) model appear to be appropriate.

There are varying degrees of complexity related to purchase decisions. In regards to vacation purchase decision, as the length of stay increases so too do the financial and social risks. It can reasonably be assumed that with increases in the duration of a vacation comes an increase in the use of a consumer's discretionary income. Expenditures on lodging, food and entertainment increase as the duration of the vacation experience increases. Thus the longer the vacation experience implies higher financial commitments. Social risks assume that individuals are concerned about what others think. Since a vacation is a relatively visible item among one's reference group, a concern is manifested that a purchase may not meet the standards of that reference group. With greater duration of the vacation experience comes greater visibility to a person's reference group (through absence), thus a greater degree of social risk is manifested. Assael's (1) model of complex consumer decision making forms the basis for the hypothesis that the level of information search with increase with the vacation's duration.

Nolan (14) in his study of visitors to a state and resort travelers found no significant differences between vacation duration and the amount of information acquired. Utilizing chi-square analysis to test for relationships produced non-significant findings for both visitors to a state as well as guests at a vacation resort.

We propose the following hypothesis:
Ho4: Subjects' information search will be related to the duration of their vacation trips. The higher the level of information search, the greater the duration subjects' vacation trips.

Like the duration of a trip, distance traveled from the home to the vacation environment is a factor unique to the travel and tourism field. It too may add to the complexity of a purchase decision. For example, when pleasure travelers leave their home for a vacation destination that is a relatively short distance away, the trip can be planned more casually. If lodging is too costly or unavailable, the traveler may simply return home often within the same day. With greater distances comes greater complexity in the prepurchase deliberation process. Greater distances are associated with higher expenditures of discretionary time and income. Unlike the casually planned vacation, the vacation which is far removed from the traveler's home environment cannot so easily be abandoned. Travel fatigue and hunger may necessitate significant expenditures regardless of the acceptability of product alternatives. Thus the greater the distance a consumer must travel from his or her home to reach a vacation destination, the greater the perceived financial and social risks inherent in such a purchase decision. According to Assael (1), with greater awareness of risks comes greater need to obtain information to assess or evaluate product alternatives.

We propose the following hypothesis:
Ho5: Subjects' information search will be related to the distance traveled

from their home to the attraction. The higher the level of information search, the greater the distance traveled.

SUMMARY OF THE PROCEDURES

The unit of analysis for this study was free and independent travelers to a historic attraction in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Historic Old Salem, Inc. is the original site of an 18th century Moravian village listed on the National Registry of Historic Places. The 72 acre complex of restored homes, shops and museums affords visitors a heritage experience through displays and reenactments of 18th century Moravian lifestyles. In 1990, Historic Old Salem, Inc.'s paid attendance was approximately 150,400 making it one of the most popular travel attractions in North Carolina and by far the most popular in the Winston-Salem area. Though the attraction benefits from group tour business, the vast majority of its ticket sales comes from free and independent travelers.

The purpose of this study was to identify meaningful segments of summer visitors to the historic attraction in terms of visitors' information search efforts. Excluded from the sample frame were visitors who arrived at the attraction as a part of a group tour since this type of patronage generally requires a different form of marketing approach. To achieve the study's objectives, eleven days were randomly selected from the total operating days during the summer of 1990. Trained interviewers were discharged on these days to contact all travel parties during three randomly selected 15 minute periods during the

attraction's operating hours. This random cluster research design is similar to Long and Perdue's (9) approach of sampling festival attendees.

A total of 382 visitor parties were contacted as they exited the welcome center and ticket counter of the attraction. Three hundred thirty one (86.6 %) of the 382 visitor parties were determined to be non residents of the county. One member of each 331 non resident party was asked to participate in the study by completing a self administered questionnaire during their visit. An inducement of free packages of Moravian cookies was offered to encourage one member of the travel party to complete the questionnaire. Subjects could return their questionnaire to any employee of the attraction. However, the majority of the respondents returned their questionnaire to the bake shop in order to receive the inducement. Yielded were 242 completed questionnaires which represented a 73.1% percent response rate.

MEASUREMENTS OF PREPURCHASE SEARCH

Consumers search for and use of information related to prepurchase decisions is a growing component of the consumer behavior literature. Measures of information search behavior include a variety of self-report measures such as the types of information sought, the number of information sources used, the amount of effort required to obtain information from certain sources, and the time spent in purchase deliberation.

This study incorporates the method used by Francken and van Raaij (6). First, the total amount of information collected during subjects' trip planning process was obtained by summing each subject's responses to a series of aided recall questions. The single numeric value reflects the total amount of information collected. It should be noted that subjects' responses to the recall questions included items produced and not produced by Historic Old Salem, Inc. The focus of the analysis was on identifying the types and extent of information search behaviors of non resident visitors to the attraction. From a descriptive standpoint, the results provided a means of assessing whether promotional efforts were being channeled in ways that conformed to visitors information needs and decision making.

Finally, three groups of respondents were created where roughly the bottom 33 percentile was labeled no prepurchase information search, the middle 33 percentile as limited, and the top 33 percentile as extensive. The three groups were subsequently analyzed for between group differences in terms of their personal and trip characteristics employing analysis of variance (ANOVA) with a Scheffe post hoc comparisons test for differences.

DESCRIPTIVE FINDINGS

Ninety four (38.8%) of the 331 respondents did not acquire information prior to their vacation purchase decision, while 70 (28.9%) of the respondents collected information from one to three sources, and 78 (32.2%) from four to 35 sources. The distribution of responses

became the basis for categorizing subjects into three roughly equal sized groups in terms of the amount of information they acquired during their vacation deliberations (18).

Subjects in the no information search group did not indicate acquiring information in their vacation deliberations. Subjects in the limited information search group, on average, acquired information from .86 (S.D. 9.7) personal, .73 (S.D. .82) neutral, .21 (S.D. .38) retail, and .21 (S.D. .61) media sources. Lastly, the subjects in the extensive information search group, on average, acquired information from 1.97 (S.D. 2.1) personal, 1.5 (S.D. 1.6) neutral, 2.3 (S.D. 2.6) retail, and 1.7 (S.D. 3.7) media sources.

Initial analysis of the passive information seekers (no information search) revealed that the majority (88.46%) were repeat visitors who apparently relied on their past experiences with the destination area to base their present purchase decisions. Subjects grouped in the limited search category were repeat visitors three times out of five times. Subjects in the extensive search category were approximately split in half between first time and repeat visitors.

Further analysis of subjects information acquisition behaviors revealed that first time visitors collected significantly more information than repeat visitors to the attraction (DF: 330, t-value: -3.502, $p \leq .0005$). First time visitors, on average, collected approximately twice as much information from personal and neutral sources than repeat visitors.

First time visitors, on average, had traveled significantly greater distances from their homes than repeat visitors to reach the vacation destination. First time visitors on average traveled approximately 1,264 miles from their homes to reach the vacation destination while repeat visitors traveled on average approximately 468 miles (DF: 330; t-value: -7.83; $p \leq .0001$).

HYPOTHESIS TESTS

Analysis of variance revealed three significant between group differences in the directions predicted (See Table 3). The higher the level of information search, the larger the number of alternatives subjects seriously considered in their vacation decisions, the fewer times subjects had repeated visited the destination area, and the greater the distance they had traveled from their home to reach the attraction. Trip planning time and duration of trip provided no means of discriminating among the three groups in terms of their information search.

IMPLICATIONS

This study demonstrates significant individual differences between one attraction's visitors in terms of their information search behavior. The findings further suggest that trip characteristics provide a basis for discriminating between levels of active and passive information seekers. In this data set, respondents who sought out and used information in their trip planning significantly differed from their passive counterparts in terms of their travel decision making. Active groups of

information seekers tended to evaluate more alternatives in their trip planning, traveled greater distances, and visited fewer times the destination area than their more passive counterparts.

The more active groups of information seekers apparently were involved in more complex vacation decisions than their passive counterparts. Choosing a long-haul destination among a set of viable alternatives that one has only limited experience with, involves purchase deliberations that are less likely to be casually made. Information needs to be obtained to understand the alternatives and mitigate the risk associated with vacation planning (18).

Managers of travel attractions are concerned with segmenting their markets. Findings of this study provide the marketing manager additional insights to define the potential audience for advertising and promotional efforts. The implications of the findings relate to both the marketing message and its distribution geographically. In this analysis, nonresident visitors who acquired and presumably used information in their trip planning were characteristic of the long haul market, who typically were first time or have limited prior experience with the destination, and who tended to evaluate more destination alternatives in their trip planning. Therefore, the marketing manager drawing inferences from these findings should evaluate and refine their promotional efforts on the basis of their ability to reach its long haul markets with information they need to evaluate the attraction among competing alternatives in a detailed and comprehensive manner.

Results from this data set provides a basis for understanding why some free and independent travelers conduct more prepurchase investigation than others. If

these findings are substantiated by future studies, it should further describe the audience of information seekers marketers can attempt to influence.

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TABLE 1
 ANTECEDENTS OF PREPURCHASE INFORMATION SEARCH
 EFFORT BY PLEASURE TRAVELERS:
 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS^a

| Variables | Relationship w/ Information Search b | Subjects | Citing |
|------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Evoked Set | + | | van Raaij (1986) |
| Trip Planning Time | + | Resort Guests | Nolan (1976) |
| | + | Visitors to a State | ibid |
| Repeat Visits (Purchases) | O | Resort Guests | Nolan (1976) |
| | - | Visitors to a State | ibid |
| | - | | Purdue & Botkin (1988) |
| | - | | Gitelson & Crompton(1984) |
| | - | | van Raaij & Francken (1984) |
| Trip Duration | O | Visitors to a State, Resort Guests | Nolan(1976) |

^a Studies lacking a corresponding sample represents a theorized relationship between the antecedent and search effort.

^b Relationship between the antecedent and search effort is denoted as positive (+), negative (-), or no relationship (0).

TABLE 2

CROSS TABULATION BETWEEN REPEAT AND FIRST TIME VISITORS ON THE
THREE GROUPINGS OF INFORMATION SEEKERS
PERCENTS OF ROW TOTALS

| | Yes | No | Totals: |
|-------------------|--------|--------|---------|
| No Search | 88.46% | 11.54% | 100% |
| Limited Search | 60.38% | 39.62% | 100% |
| Extensive Se..... | 48.53% | 51.47% | 100% |
| Totals: | 64.16% | 35.84% | 100% |

TABLE 3
ANOVA ANALYSIS OF TRIP CHARACTERISTICS BY LEVEL OF
INFORMATION SEARCH*

| Trip Characteristics | Level of Information Search | | | F-Value | p-Value |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|---------|---------|
| | No search Mean (SD) | Limited Mean (SD) | Extensive Mean (SD) | | |
| Evoked Set Size | 1.5 (.9)a,b | 2.0 (1.5)a | 2.2 (1.3)b | 8.53 | .0003 |
| Trip Planning Time | 2.9 (2.4) | 2.8 (1.8) | 2.6 (1.5) | .421 | .66 |
| Number of Repeat Visits | 16.1(26.2)a,b | 5.3 (14.6)a | 5.4 (17.1)b | 7.37 | .0008 |
| Trip Duration | 3.32 (1.7) | 3.88 (2.9) | 3.48 (1.6) | 1.39 | .25 |
| Distance Traveled | 481 (734)a | 925 (1208)a | 713 (899) | 4.27 | .015 |

*Means with the same alphabetical subscript are significant different from each other at the .05 probability level using the Scheffe post hoc comparisons test for differences.