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Nina Mistilis
University of New South Wales

Ulrike Gretzel
University of Vienna, ugretzel@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

A pilot study involving 38 qualitative interviews of domestic and international visitors to New South Wales was conducted to gain preliminary, in-depth insights into the way visitors search for information when they are at the destination and the impact of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) on their search patterns, including their use of visitor information centres (VICs). The findings suggest that search patterns are very complex, combining many online and offline sources and much of the search indeed happens while at the destination. Visitors bring along a variety of technologies but still rely on printed materials, maps and VICs as they want unique, trustworthy and personalized information from local sources. VICs can play an important role in inspiring travellers and influencing their trip plans if they are conveniently located and provide knowledgeable, friendly staff who actively engages with the visitors.

Keywords

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VISITOR AT-DESTINATION INFORMATION SEARCH: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

Nina Mistilis

University of New South Wales

Ulrike Gretzel

University of Wollongong

ABSTRACT

A pilot study involving 38 qualitative interviews of domestic and international visitors to New South Wales was conducted to gain preliminary, in-depth insights into the way visitors search for information when they are at the destination and the impact of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) on their search patterns, including their use of visitor information centres (VICs). The findings suggest that search patterns are very complex, combining many online and offline sources and much of the search indeed happens while at the destination. Visitors bring along a variety of technologies but still rely on printed materials, maps and VICs as they want unique, trustworthy and personalized information from local sources. VICs can play an important role in inspiring travellers and influencing their trip plans if they are conveniently located and provide knowledgeable, friendly staff who actively engages with the visitors.

INTRODUCTION

VICs, call centres, brochures and websites are established ways in which tourism destinations provide their information to potential and actual visitors (Pearce, 2004; Mistilis & D'Ambra, 2008; Ballantyne, Hughes & Ritchie, 2009). However, new ICTs such as social media (Facebook, Twitter, TripAdvisor) and global positioning systems (GPS) technology change visitor expectations in terms of what information should be available and how (e.g. through mobile phone apps). Further, they increase the number of sources and channels available, leading to new possible information search patterns. While these new technologies significantly impact all stages of visitor trips (before, during, after), their influence is especially prominent for the "during the trip" stage - at the destination - as visitors increasingly defer decision-making to after they arrive at the destination and there can access information easily from their mobile devices (Wang, Park & Fesenmaier, 2012).

Though VICs still represent a key information source for tourists (Minghetti & Celotto, 2013), existing theoretical models of visitor information search are obsolete and little is known about at-destination search and evolving perceptions of VICs. Specifically, little empirical evidence exists explaining how emerging technologies influence which visitor groups use what communication channels during their trip to satisfy what information needs. Therefore this paper aims to explore two questions:

1. How do visitors search for information during their trips and what are their specific information needs?
2. What are their perceptions of VICs?

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative interview methodology to gain an in-depth understanding of visitor

information search patterns in Australia and perceptions of VICs at or on route to their final destination. Interviews took place in Sydney (CBD and Manly), Kiama and Wollongong and were conducted at respective VICs and major attractions; they were semi-structured and were audio recorded and later transcribed.

A total of 38 interviews of domestic and international visitors were conducted, 20 in Sydney and 18 in the Kiama/Wollongong area between mid-October to early December 2012. The sample is balanced in terms of gender and visitor origin and includes a broad age range, with the majority of respondents however being older. The sample had somewhat more repeat than first-time visitors to each destination.

RESULTS

Analyses of respondent transcripts revealed great needs for information at the destination and the use of a mix of technology-based and traditional information sources to satisfy these at-destination information needs.

TRIP PLANNING

Respondents generally reported low levels of advance planning, having planned some aspects and “*fill in things around that*”. Even those who planned extensively in the pre-trip phase report room for additional activities.

“Not much, not much. We’ve just had the flight tickets, the hotel and that’s it.” (Female, International, 40-44)

The clear consensus regarding the most useful type of information for these visitors was local knowledge, information about special events, limited-time attractions and suggestions regarding ‘off- the-beaten-track’ activities. Child-appropriate attractions and activities were also mentioned; maps are still important despite all the technology they carry with them.

“Local maps, transport, places to stay, things to do, activities that are happening at the time.” (Male, International, 60-64)

TECHNOLOGY USE

Domestic and international visitors of all ages bring various technologies with them: mobile phones, tablets, laptops, GPS/navigation systems. Many carry smart phones and use mobile apps and QR code readers. Even if they do not use them currently, they think apps and QR codes are useful for their convenience; unsurprisingly WiFi was important to visitors.

“We’ve got a laptop and an iPhone, so we just send photos back to Brisbane of where we are. We’ve got ... GPS in the four-wheel drive.” (Male, Domestic, 50-54)

Many use the Internet to find information, even older visitors. However, technology could not provide all answers for planning activities at the destination. Therefore, most respondents use a combination of online and offline sources: VICs are part of the mix. Only a few respondents had no plans of using the

Internet during the trip.

"We look on the Internet, but the easiest thing is just to go to the information centre and get all the maps and such. We use a GPS system like a lot of other people, but find it a little bit limited. (Male, Domestic, 65-69).

VIC PERCEPTIONS

Perceptions of VICs in NSW are mixed but generally good, although some interviewees mentioned that they were not as good as VICs seen in other countries.

"It was a little bit disappointing compared to others I have visited." (Female, International, 40-44)

For many the VIC is still the first stop at the destination in order to satisfy immediate information needs.

"VICs, that's the first stop.... Tourist information, get a map, get a plan of the town, and then we'll go." (Male, Domestic, 70+)

There is clear evidence that knowledgeable and motivated VIC staff is the key to superior visitor experiences.

"Sometimes if you're looking for something in particular and you're a bit bamboozled as to where to go the staff will put you on the right track." (Male, Domestic, 60-64)

While many think that VICs are important, most would not go out of their way to find them. However some will even if finding VICs is difficult.

"We knew there had to be one there but we did many circuits ... and we couldn't find it." (Female, Domestic, 65-69)

THE IDEAL VIC

The respondents describe the ideal VIC as conveniently located and equipped with friendly, helpful and knowledgeable staff and providing information beyond the immediate area; lack of adequate parking was a deterrent.

"What I like is some garrulous person behind the counter that you can walk up to and say: 'What's worth seeing here?'" (Male, International, 70+)

CONCLUSION

Information needs while visitors are at the destination are extensive and satisfied using a combination of sources and channels. Most importantly, there is no dominant strategy. The results show that visitors differ in terms of the emphasis they place on certain channels and that all are still important. In particular, the findings confirm the results from previous studies in showing that there is still an important role for VICs, despite visitors' increasing technology use pre-trip and after arrival at the destination. VICs provide great potential for influence on travel itineraries, within the destination and beyond.

Even though travellers use smartphones and car navigation systems extensively, they still want maps; brochure racks are still important but insufficient as visitors want personalized and unique information. This implies that VIC staff must have intricate knowledge of the destination and proactively base their recommendations on a good understanding of what visitors want and need.

The research presents a preliminary contribution to analyses of at - destination visitor information search and also to the ongoing debate of the value of VICs in that search, given the emergence of user friendly technologies. However, there is still inadequate empirical evidence as to how emerging new technologies influence which visitor groups use what communication channels during their trip and to satisfy what information needs. Such knowledge is important in that it could inform industry practice. This means that Australian tourism destinations likely provide inadequate services to their visitors, missing out on opportunities to encourage spending at the destination, repeat visitation and powerful word of mouth.

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