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Abstract

County and local tourism officials have a great need for data to help them make their decisions. The authors surveyed professionals to determine data used and needed, the types of decisions made, and where data is obtained. The results provide a profile for information sharing.

Keywords

Robert M. O'Halloran, Donald F. Holecek, Tourism Professionals Indicate Research Needs, Data, Sampling, Chi-square

Tourism Professionals Indicate Research Needs

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County and local tourism officials have a great need for data to help them make their decisions. The authors surveyed professionals to determine data used and needed, the types of decisions made, and where data is obtained. The results provide a profile for information sharing.

The tourism industry, as an increasingly significant segment of many regional economies, requires a great deal of attention by planners and managers. This attention generally takes the form of forecasting revenues and budgeting. The county and community level government planners and managers usually have the greatest need for data to complete these tasks.

Kotler¹ outlined a questionnaire that would assist tourism planners and managers in determining their research and data needs. The questionnaire dealt with basic questions, the answers to which would assist in summarizing these needs. The questions constitute a self study that examines the types of decisions made, information needed to make these decisions, current data that are being used, more specific data needs, and where data currently used are obtained. This self study and the answers to these questions at the county and community level could indicate that the source for much of this needed information could be secondary sources.

Secondary sources are often useful because the research is complete and the results are generally available at minimum cost. At the county and community levels, the availability of data is often directed by budget and staff limitations. Additionally, Cook² stated that there may also be other limitations such as lack of training among staff members, lack of reliable research methods, and possibly the lack of a workable data collection system. These limitations place the burden of acquiring the data and knowing the quality and limitations of data on local planning officials.

Tourism Professionals Are Surveyed

A survey was developed to analyze the beliefs of tourism professionals about tourism research and their own data needs. The survey was administered in March of 1988 at the Michigan Governor's Conference on Tourism in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Attendees at the conference were used as the sampling frame. The sample poses some potential data limitations because of the cross section of individuals at the conference and the absence of a consistent definition of a tourism professional. Attendees included county/community tourism officials, innkeepers, restaurant operators, recreation professionals, park managers, legislators, tourism educators, researchers, etc..

This population as a sampling frame limits the control over the sample, but provides the sample with individual respondents who have a real interest in tourism and are representative of the wide range of businesses associated with tourism. The sample selected was a non-probability convenience sample. Of 80 surveys distributed, approximately 40 percent were returned.

Logistically it was difficult to complete the survey. Two specific areas of the conference were utilized to attain usable responses. The first was at the close of a seminar session asking attendees at the session to please take the time to fill out the survey, and the other was in the "market place" in which county or community or private organizations had display booths to distribute promotional literature about their areas.

Basic information about the status of some of the tourism professionals is summarized in Figure 1. The majority (66 percent) of the respondents earned a bachelor's degree; another 22 percent had obtained a master's degree. Over 80 percent were members of their local and/or regional tourism organization, and the majority were involved in pri-

Figure 1
Survey Respondents

Educational Level (Highest level)	High school	9%
	College (bachelor's)	66%
	College (master's)	22%
	Other	3%
Operating Level:	State	7%
	County	36%
	Management (private)	50%
	Consultant (private)	7%
Membership In Tourism Association		81%

vate business and county level government, respectively. One should also note that many of the county level officials also operate their own businesses. Questions in the survey dealt with the data and research needs of these planners and managers and the usefulness of selected secondary data.

Data Used Vary Widely

Approximately 16 percent of the respondents indicated that they currently use census data in their planning and managing efforts. Another segment (25 percent) utilized employment figures, while others reported using sales or use tax figures. Other data listed by respondents included room assessment taxes, traffic counts, weather tracking, and selected research from periodicals. In addition to questions concerning the data used by these planners and managers, another question asked which data were needed most. These responses did not remain consistent with what was previously indicated. Figure 2 illustrates these inconsistencies. For example, sales tax was reported to be needed less than the percentage who indicated they utilized these data.

Figure 2
Data Needed vs. Data Used

Data Needed		Data Used
22%	Census	16%
22%	Employment Figures	25%
16%	Penetration Rates	13%
13%	Sales Tax	19%
44%	Occupancy Rates	66%
28%	Mix of Demand (market segments)	31%
16%	Use Tax	28%

Responses to another question indicated that despite the numbers of individuals who use these data, over 50 percent of the respondents do not think that it is useful data. This may suggest that planners and managers use anything that is available to them rather than use nothing at all. Respondents did indicate that sales and use tax data would be more useful if they were transformed into tourism sales revenues figures for the county, provided on a monthly basis and generally made more available.

These responses reflect a need to better understand sales and use tax figures. In Michigan, the sales tax is a flat 4 percent on receipts for retail sales, including fast food, family restaurants, sporting goods,

taverns and clubs, amusements parks, etc.. The use tax is 4 percent for the privilege of using in Michigan an item purchased from another state. When goods are purchased for use, storage, or consumption in Michigan (and no sales tax has been collected) the final user must pay a use tax; this applies to lodging rooms sales.³

Some respondents indicated that the tax figures do not point out actual sales dollars. Sales and use tax figures are not an absolute measure of tourism performance, but they are a measure of comparative change. Users of these data need to be aware of the quality of the data and their limitations. An example of this is someone using use tax figures to calculate lodging room revenue for an area. The use tax figure divided by 4 percent will give the user a room sales revenue figure, but what is the accuracy of that figure? Users would have to be aware of the individual types of operations reporting, operations that have headquarters outside the county that may report taxes in another county, and operations that report on different time tables (monthly, annually, quarterly). The respondents' comments and the example given indicate planners and managers are interested in the interpretation of these data rather than the raw figures. Possibly they lack the skills or the time to covert raw data into information they need to better accomplish their jobs.

Respondents Rely Upon Data

The source(s) of data that most of the respondents relied upon are the Michigan Travel Bureau (Dept. of Commerce), the Michigan Travel, Tourism and Recreation Resources Center, private firms, libraries, etc.. A few respondents listed other outside sources, and all indicated a willingness to utilize good quality data regardless of the source. Additionally, it was noted that the majority of individuals relied on aggregate statewide data rather than data that had been broken down for individual counties or communities.

Respondents also noted that tourism planning for their respective areas was a collaborative effort by many involved parties and that tourism was in the developmental stages in over 70 percent of the respondents' counties. One could conclude from this that the counties are voicing a great need for planning and managing tools. The question then becomes: Will the state accommodate these needs? Respondents were also asked to express their opinions concerning research budgeting. The majority indicated that the state and not the local or federal government should be responsible for tourism research and the subsequent distribution of these research findings.

Additionally, as part of the analysis, several chi-square tests were conducted to ascertain if there was an association between variables. One such test focused on use tax used and use tax needed. In this test, the null hypothesis was rejected, indicating that there was no association between use tax used and use tax needed. This can also be supported by the fact that many operations (particularly lodging) use occupancy figures for planning and managing and that use tax figures can be considered a surrogate for occupancy figures. The final test conducted examined education level and respondents' attitudes toward research budgets by the state, local, or federal branches. One might have logically argued that the higher the education level of the respondent, the more

awareness an individual would have for research, and thus there would be an association between these two variables. This test indicated that there was no such association.

The views of the tourism professionals about research could be summarized in the following ways:

- There is a definite need for additional data at the lower levels of government to accurately plan and manage tourism activity at these levels.
- This need for data must be addressed first at the local level with a self assessment of practical data needs.
- Despite the relatively high educational levels of the respondents, there remains a need for training in the use of secondary data and research in general.
- The tourism industry needs to work collectively to interpret data for practical use and implementation at the county and community levels.

Tourism Information Systems Could Be Developed

Tourism professionals at both the state and local levels could use the results of this survey to begin the development of a tourism information system that would collect, analyze, and distribute data to tourism planners and managers in a format that they can immediately use. This would require a collaborative effort on the part of the state (perhaps as a coordinating body) and the local tourism associations. In this system, the detailed data needs would have to be identified and somehow produced and distributed. This, of course, will lead to discussions of resources and budgets. There would be some cost involved in the process which one would have to weigh against the possible benefits of successful tourism planning. The use of such data as sales tax and use taxes should not be based on the lack of other available data, but on their merit as planning and decision-making tools.

To begin the process of developing an information system, tourism professionals will need to conduct a self-analysis and answer the following questions. (see Figure 3):

• **What are the sources of data that are available to tourism professionals?** This question can be answered by reviewing a list of local, state, and federal departments and agencies, many of which do not specifically conduct tourism research but, inadvertently, collect tourism data. Such agencies are the departments of Treasury, State, Natural Resources, Commerce, Transportation, Employment Security, and Agriculture. Additionally, the local and federal governments also collect assorted data through such agencies as chamber(s) of commerce and/or the federal departments of Interior and Agriculture.

• **What types of data are available from these secondary sources?** The aforementioned agencies collect such data as sales and use tax, census data, visitor counts, campground use, bridge crossings, highway traffic, weather data, and recreational licenses (hunting, fishing, boating). Additionally, these secondary sources also have inventories of

tourist attractions, both man-made and natural. Many agencies also conduct a variety of supply/demand and/or feasibility studies that are available to the public. It should be stressed that this information has already been collected and is generally available through these agencies at minimum cost. Simply stated, tourism professionals should use data already available.

• **Who are the data users?** The term “tourism professionals” is a very broad one. Users of tourism data would be organizations and/or individuals which have a data need and perhaps do not have the resources to obtain data by themselves, including chamber(s) of commerce, consultants, developers, convention and visitor bureaus, and tourism planners and managers. Additionally, the media and individual tourists and local residents are interested in the interpretation of these data. Each potential user would have different needs for data, but the different users and the data would all be components of the same network. A spokesperson for the Michigan Travel, Tourism and Recreation Resources Center indicated that demand for tourism data from their center was from (in descending order), private consultants, private operators, state agencies, chambers of commerce, the media, and an assortment of individual requests.⁴

• **What are the tourism professionals' data needs?** This question cannot be answered to encompass all tourism professionals. Each user will have a specified need for data, i.e., forecasting, etc. Each professional will need to determine data requirements for individual operations.

• **Can tourism professionals assess their needs accurately?** The study indicates that not all tourism professionals have the necessary skills to complete this task. They must conduct need assessments to collect truly useful data. This will avoid individuals using any data that is available just because that data is the only data available.

• **Do tourism professionals need training in data utilization and interpretation?** As noted in the study, many of the tourism professionals have completed higher education requirements but do not necessarily have the research and interpretation skills necessary to effectively select and analyze data. Training and the delivery of such training could be accomplished with the cooperation of the academic community. Professionals can assess the educational institutions in their state and identify institutions and/or individuals with an interest in tourism. One way to begin this process might be to obtain the cooperation of the Cooperative Extension Services at the state land grant universities.

• **What type of data analysis is needed?** These analyses will depend on the identified needs of individual operations and organizations and might take the form of academic research with practical application as a requirement or college student projects with faculty supervision, which could mean any type of analysis based on the data and the needs of the operator. There are benefits to both faculty and tourism professionals in this situation. The faculty are provided with a variety of research material and the organizations and subsequently their communities are assisted in economic development.

Figure 3
Information System (Network) Initiation Topics

1

Sources of Data

2

Types of Data

3

Data Users

4

Data Needs

5

Needs Assessment

6

Training

7

Data Analysis

8

Data Distribution

9

System Funding

• **How would this data be distributed?** The distribution system would depend on the membership of the information system. Once interested organizations or individuals have been identified, this would allow a network to be structured with reference to geographic need. Private businesses, universities, and trade associations would be excellent components for a distribution system.

• **How will the development of an information system be funded?** Funding a system will require cost sharing on the part of its members. The membership will have to conduct a cost/benefit analysis to weigh the costs of the system against the long-term benefits that would be gained. Both private and public resources should be explored for funding assistance. Often companies such as AT&T will offer assistance to such development efforts. State tourism agencies can sometimes offer seed monies for such projects. The small business institute(s), economic development agencies, and cooperative extension services may all be useful resources in finding sources of funding.

The development of an information system is simply the efficient use of existing data. The system merely coordinates these data and takes advantage of what is already available. Tourism professionals who often operate on tight budgets must take advantage of the resources provided them in their own states. The stimulus for the development of an information system will have to come from the tourism industry and its professionals. Tourism professionals can utilize state and/or regional tourism conferences and meetings of trade associations to begin networking and information sharing. This would be an informal beginning but could assist in the development of a system that would meet their research needs.

The research/data needs of county or local level tourism professionals are known (or can be assessed), and it is generally known how these needs can be addressed. It remains to be seen whether the resources will be made available to address these needs in an efficient manner.

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