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INTRODUCTION

Incentive travel is one of the fastest growing segments in the world tourism industry. It accounts for four percent of the total U.S. meetings industry, attracting more than eight million domestic and international participants annually, and bringing $13.2 billion into to U.S. economy (The Economic Significance of Meetings to the U.S. Economy, 2011). In a nutshell, an incentive program is a formal scheme of travel to promote or encourage specific actions or behavior by a specific group of people during a defined period of time (Davidson & Cope, 2003). Appropriate knowledge of the program and its needs can help incentive planners and the destination marketing organizations (DMOs) to assemble a tailor made package for the corporations (Ansary, 2010; Jones & Yu, 2011). This study examines the contemporary trends and motivations associated with incentive travel. It further examines the effectiveness of the destination marketing organizations and incentive planners in terms of their capability to promote the desired destination to the corporations in a tailor made and friendly manner. Three research questions guide my proposed study:

1) What selection criteria, preferred elements and type of online media sources are used to choose the destination? What are the motivation factors of your clients that you take into consideration? And how is the evaluation of functionality and quality of website content based on Perdue's model?

2) Is there a shift in the way that incentive travel planner retrieve their information? To what extent incentive travel planners use and/or rely on social media?

3) Are there any traces of representative dissonance between promoted and projected images through preferred media tools by incentive planners and the actual images portrayed by the destination themselves through popular online resources?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Extant literature discusses the growth of the incentive industry and examines the motivation and desired attractiveness of destinations in terms of incentive travel. Although research in this line of study is sparse, discussion of the work of some noteworthy scholars warranty attention. It is noted that the use of incentives differs in different countries. For instance, O´Brien (1997) says that the French, Italian and German prefer domestic destinations where as UK companies often take their incentives abroad. On the other hand, in the Scandinavian countries, it is against work ethos to award only a few persons; therefore, incentives in Scandinavia are more like a company outing than an incentive trip (Davidson & Cope, 2003, 164). Past research on incentive travel has mostly examined the comparable attractiveness of most popular incentives and discussed the influence of social pressure on incentive attractiveness and the effect of the motivation on incentive choices (Shinew and Backman, 1995). Ricci and Holland (1992) emphasize that recreation opportunities are a significant motivating factor for incentive travel. Aligned with this view, Witt, Gammon and White (1992) report Canada as a potential incentive travel destination with abundant recreation opportunities for the UK market. Shinew and Backman (1995), using a survey technique, examined the comparable attractiveness of the most popular incentives and concluded that recreation-related travel opportunities were a significant motivating factor. Incentive travel creates demand for restaurants, entertainment, sports and leisure facilities, excursions and meetings (Ricci & Holland, 1992).

The significance of incentive travel as a motivational tool for business purposes is reported in a comprehensive manner by Davidson & Cope (2003). Especially in the US market, incentive travel is a common and gladly used method to keep the motivation level among employees high. The core function of incentive travel is to provide a mixture of a business and leisure trip, as a planned benefit for increased effectiveness in business operations (Davidson & Cope 2003, 164). Physical motivation is, in fact, one of the main reasons for travel. For instance, team-sports generate team-dynamics and are also good for the interpersonal and social aspects of team building. Both employees and executives can benefit from this (Davidson & Cope, 2003, 169). Cultural motivation also includes a wide area of interesting aspects to be considered such as a trip to a foreign country offers a variety of new things, starting from the landscape, over culinary aspects to local habits and peoples traditions. Activities are the second important part of the incentive itinerary. As group dynamics and social interaction are meant to be developed during the trip, certain activities can be organized which have a focus on these topics. Possible activities, which fit into a common incentive trip, could be basic ancient Olympics, an adventure safari, carting or even sailing; basically any kind of activity which requires but also develops team-building features (Davidson & Cope, 2003). Hence, incentive travel motivations are several and its package should take different kinds of motivations into consideration. This information is useful for incentive planners and destination marketing organizations in that they can design tailor made programs for their clients.

However, few studies have examined the manner in which destination image are conveyed to the incentive planners. In fact, extant literature in tourism argues that destination selection is subject to the manner the destination images are portrayed by the DMOs to the intermediaries in addition to the way they are perceived by the tourism markets and the distributors (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Joppe, Martin & Waalen, 2001; Lin & Huang, 2009). In the context of incentive travel, destination images influence the incentive planners who act as intermediaries in that their perception and understanding will guide the package they create for the corporations. Destination images can play an important role in the strategic marketing of a destination

interested in attracting incentive travel markets because they are a prominent feature in the decision making process and impact preferences, anticipation, behavior and satisfaction once the destination is selected (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Joppe, Martin & Waalen, 2001; Lin & Huang, 2009).

One popular destination image promotional tool, which has revolutionized the marketing field, is the Internet (Choi, Lehto & Morrison, 2007; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2006). The Internet offers great potential to influence consumers' perceived images and has become an important component of destination marketing research. However, investigation of Internet formation agents is still in its initial stage, although it has dramatically influenced and reshaped destination marketing and consumption behaviors associated with seeking of information (Choi et al, 2007). Because of the accelerated use of Internet in tourism, destination websites have become important tourism marketing medium which are most frequently visited by travel planners seeking online information (Choi, Letho, & Oleary, 2007). Maintaining an effective website is therefore crucial for a destination marketing organization so that it can retain/capture the interests of its existing markets and expand its audience base (Law, Qi, & Buhalis, 2010). Websites' functional and usability aspects are also important. According to Chu (2001), travelers evaluate websites based on their quality of information interactive and attractiveness. Therefore, tourism destination organizations need to continuously redesign their websites and upgrade their web technology to make them easy to access and more personalized for their desired audience (Baloglu & Pekcan, 2006).

This study presents an incentive travel marketing model (ITMM) to provide an overall view of the proposed research focus. The model stresses on both the demand and supply dimensions of destination image. On the supply side, destination organizations and incentive travelers are active role players can produce and modify destination images to meet the demand of incentive travel. The demand side consists of incentive travel companies and also the incentive travel planners. The model points out the dual role of incentive travel planners in the context of receiving destination images and producing/modifying destination images for their clients (as intermediaries).

METHODOLOGY

This study is work in progress. The data for my study is being collected in two phases. The first phase consists of an electronic survey to elicit desired information from the incentive planners. The second phase uses the content analysis technique using a Destination Effectiveness Model (DEM) to make an assessment of the manner in which destination images are communicated by the destination marketing organizations for the desired destinations in the United States. For the first phase, the e-survey is being conducted via the platform designed by SurveyMonkey. Questions are mostly open-ended and desired informaion is being elicited through the following sequential set of tasks: 1) check incentive planners' actual image portrayed by destinations; 2) find out how from and where they get incentive travel demand information and how they are influenced by it or use it; 3) examine the motivations of their clients (corporations) and the type of programs they offer to the clients; 4) find out about marketing research and strategy; 5) examine the content of the destination image to determine how they are promoted by the incentive planners; 6) match the incentive planner promotion content with the incentive travel motivations identified by existing research; and 7) finally, compare the projected destination images by the incentive planners with the actual images communicated by the DMOs on their signature websites to identify signs of representative dissonance between promoted

images in brochures or other promotional collateral designed by incentive planners and the actual images projected by the destination themselves through their signature websites.

E-survey will be sent to approximately one hundred randomly selected incentive travel planners from across the United States. The list will be extensively inclusive of those focusing on the top incentive travel destinations in the United States: Florida, California, Hawaii, Nevada and Arizona. Signature websites of the most popular incentive travel destinations will be examined using DEM. Efforts will be made to test for reliability and validity of data and to reduce subjective bias.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study will have a significant outcome for the incentive travel industry and related academia. Although, some studies have appeared that discuss the growth of the incentive industry and examine the motivation, programs, and desired attractiveness of destinations in terms of incentive travel, few have examined the manner in which destination images promoted by the destination marketing organizations are conveyed to the incentive planners. Therefore, an important contribution is made in this direction. Few studies have researched the influence of projected online destination images and their quality on destination selection and the designing of the incentive travel packages by the incentive intermediaries. This study makes an effort to fill this lacuna.

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