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Mary Tabacchi
Cornell University

Jukka Laitamaki
Fordham University

Heather Brayton

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ENHANCING SOCIO-CULTURAL INTERACTION THROUGH
DEVELOPMENT OF TRAVEL PACKAGES

BY

DR. MARY TABACCHI, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
252 STATLER HALL
SCHOOL OF HOTEL ADMINISTRATION
CORNELL UNIVERSITY
ITHACA, NEW YORK 14853

DR. JUKKA LAITAMAKI, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
FORDHAM UNIVERSITY
113 WEST 60TH STREET
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10023

AND

MS. HEATHER BRAYTON, CONSULTANT
LAVENTHOL HORWATH
2 CENTER PLAZA
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02108

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to study the needs and desires of Americans who are interested in socio-cultural aspects of travel. In this study we analyzed interest in Finnish Spas and Finland. Qualitative research was conducted using focus groups. After identifying four market segments who were interested in socio-cultural travel, travel packages were specifically designed and tested for each market segment. Ultimately, our goals were to tailor-make travel packages to meet the needs of each specific market segment.

To encourage discussion regarding inter-cultural travel to Finland, background information was provided on this country, emphasizing its uniqueness as a cultural crossroad between East and West. A video tape showing Finnish people, food, history, natural and scenic beauty were used to initiate the discussions. Slides depicting activities available to the traveler were shown.

The research process by which socio-cultural travel packages can be designed will be reported together with key findings.

ENHANCING SOCIO-CULTURAL INTERACTION THROUGH DEVELOPMENT OF TRAVEL PACKAGES

INTRODUCTION

This study was designed to achieve increased travel to Finnish Spas by encouraging and enhancing cross cultural interaction. The authors developed and tested socio-cultural spa travel packages to the destination country by: 1) defining target markets, 2) identifying target market needs and wants, 3) analyzing strengths and weaknesses of the destination country and its spas, and 4) testing and recommending alternative socio-cultural spa packages tailored for each market segment. Additionally, audio visual promotion materials for marketing socio-cultural spa travel were developed and tested.

The nature of the study was explorative, and the qualitative focus group method was chosen as it provides rich data. This is because members of focus groups can express their feelings and emotions about the suggested travel package instead of answering multiple choice questions and becoming a statistic in a study. The travel experience can be simulated in focus groups with the assistance of video tapes and slides. Additionally, members of the focus group can interact with each other and with the researchers to learn more about socio-cultural travel experiences. They can express opinions, feelings and ask questions as they would while traveling.

The moderator has control over the information given to subjects and with audio-visual images he can make the consumer actually participate in the socio-cultural travel experience. As a result of this interaction between consumer and audio-visuals, the moderator can obtain "almost ready-made components" for the promotion of actual travel packages.

At the early stages of this study, it was realized that spas as a destination in another country would not appeal to traditional American spa goers. It might be appropriate to provide spa lodging; but the motive for the traveler to choose a spa travel package is the opportunity to interact with local people. In this particular case, our subjects were most interested in the vicarious; they wanted to live the way the Finns live, experiencing their lifestyle.

The presentation of this study is divided into two sections. The first will be the review of the literature on focus groups. The second, will discuss the application of focus group research to developing socio-cultural spa travel packages.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Presently there are two kinds of commercial marketing research, qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative research is defined by the absence of numerical measurement and statistical analysis. This type of

research provides an in-depth understanding of a small number of customers. In practice, qualitative research has become synonymous with the focus group interview.(2)

Focus group research was developed in the 1950's and was based on group therapy methods used by clinicians. The concept was based on the assumption that individuals with common problems would share their thoughts with others having the same interests and problems.(1)

Focus groups give the researcher an opportunity to experience "real consumers" and a chance to understand their wants and needs. A focus group can be defined as a research technique in which a small group of individuals are brought together to discuss their opinions about something--a product, service, an idea, a distribution system, an advertisement, etc. In contrast to the individual interview, the group setting of the focus group allows the opinions of each person to be considered and discussed by a number of individuals. It is believed that there is a synergism that results from the discussion of ideas by the group which leads to a richer outcome in terms of information gained.(4)

The people in the focus group (generally eight to twelve) are led through an open, in-depth discussion by a group moderator. The moderator's objective is to focus the discussion on relevant subject areas in a non-directive manner. This type of interview is one in which people jointly participate in an unstructured/indirect interview. The group is generally selected purposely to include persons who have a common background.

This research method is designed to evoke the opinions, attitudes, and behavior of target audiences.

PREPARING FOR A FOCUS GROUP

Selection of the Moderator

It is important to keep in mind that the results and discussion of the group are largely influenced by the moderator. He or she must lead a discussion so that all objectives are met; in addition, this individual must be able to promote thinking and stimulate interaction within the group.(4) The moderator must be intimately familiar with the purpose and objective of the research and possess excellent empathy and interpersonal communication skills.

The moderator must be thoroughly knowledgeable about the subject studied and must know when to probe group members and when to remain silent.(1)

A unique feature of the group interview is the enormous flexibility, scope and freedom of action permitted by the moderator. This carries with it a risk and a challenge: the introduction of bias and the loss of objectivity.(5)

Formulation of an Outline

The most important aspect of preparing for a focus group is to set objectives. The researcher must: (1) determine what is already known or thought to be known, (2) determine what is needed to be learned and put those objectives in writing before the project is undertaken.

Experienced interviewers know that it is far more important to listen and react perceptively to what respondents are saying than to emit a volley of questions, regardless of how elegantly they are phrased.(9)

Recruiting Participants

The ideal focus group is conducted with 8-12 individuals. Results may be affected if numbers fall outside this range.(6) It is wise to over recruit for focus groups unless you are sure that all individuals who have agreed to participate in the study will do so.

It is helpful to provide for both homogeneity as well as contrast within groups. The homogeneity will provide consistency between participants in regard to their stage in the life cycle and social class, while a certain degree of contrast will spark differing opinions making for valuable information from the session.(4) It appears that the more socially and intellectually homogeneous the interview group, the more productive its reports. Interviewees of widely differing social status often make comments or refer to experiences which are alien or meaningless to others.

Compensation for Participants

It is a very common practice to compensate individuals for their time in a focus group. Compensation is often expected by those familiar with the research technique or those who have partaken in such research at another time. Compensation does not have to be monetary in nature; a small gift or token of appreciation can be substituted and is often welcomed.(4)

The Physical Environment

The physical environment is extremely important to the success of the focus group interview. The atmosphere must be as relaxed as possible in order to encourage informal discussion.

There are pros and cons to the selection of any location. Conducting the research in the client's building may introduce respondent bias by revealing the sponsor of the study. On the other hand, the more neutral sites may incur out-of-pocket costs for transportation and room

rental but do help to conceal the identity of the sponsor.(7)

If the session is going to be video taped, which is most desirable provisions should be made to do so. Permission should be asked of the subjects and the seating arranged so that taping is facilitated.

Number of Sessions

The number of sessions depends on the topic being considered, the number of market segments to be studied, the homogeneity of the groups and, of course, financial considerations. The research must concentrate on the major segments most useful to the specific purposes of the study. The objective is to study as few groups as possible while at the same time realizing the necessity to replicate the focus group for each segment being studied.

Typical focus group research is conducted using three or four sessions. It is rare that a study would require more than 11 or 12 sessions. The largest percentage of new information is learned from the first two focus groups, by the third and fourth, little new information is gained. If two identical groups go in completely opposite directions, more groups must be conducted.(1)

Costs

Focus group research is one of the most cost-effective and expeditious ways of generating ideas and pre-testing marketing concepts. For these reasons, its use in qualitative research has increased tremendously. Consumer-oriented focus groups are relatively inexpensive to conduct, ranging from as little as \$3,500 to as much as \$6,000 per group.

THE INTERVIEW

Opening Remarks

The moderator's initial remarks to the group will define the ground rules and set the tone for the entire session. Opening comments have a special purpose. These remarks give the respondents an orientation as to the scope of the session as well as the topic to be covered. This introduction allows the subjects to form expectations as well as understand approximate boundaries.(4)

There are three important aspects of assuring that a focus group runs smoothly; tracking, pacing and balancing participation. Each are the responsibility of the moderator.

Tracking

While it may be tempting to follow one or more tangents, the moderator must discretely control the discussion and cover his/her series of questions and objectives. This method of tracking produces a relatively orderly set of data for each focus group. It provides a framework for each session, assures all subjects will be covered in the same manner and allows for a thorough and rapid report to be produced.(9)

Pacing

The moderator must pace the session to insure that all topics are covered equally. Focus groups usually last between one and three hours. Common courtesy to the participants dictates that sessions begin and end on time. Good pacing will ensure that all topics are covered in sufficient depth within the allotted time span.

Balancing Participation

If the moderator is to get all respondents to contribute everything they know about a particular topic, it is necessary to balance participation from all members. This means encouraging those less verbal individuals and discouraging, to a point, those with over-verbalization tendencies.

WRITING THE REPORT

In reporting the results of the session, quantitative words and practices should be avoided in favor of softer words. In addition, what the moderator/analyst derives from the research is paramount.(3) Analyses and interpretations are critical, and the reports should be unbiased and carefully constructed.

Analysis and Interpretation

As with all research, financial restrictions drive many of the executive decisions within the project. When time and cost constraints are severe, a short, impressionistic summary of the principle findings can be prepared at minimal cost to the client. This type of reporting is often used when the client has been present at the focus groups and when the respondents reactions can lead to only one conclusion.

When a longer, more thorough report is requested, the researcher may feel more comfortable that his/her findings can be accurately presented. This makes analyses and interpretation much easier for the research team and/or the client.

THE STUDY

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study consists of three components: the subject (potential traveler), the researcher (focus group moderator), and the research object (hypothetical socio-cultural travel package). The moderator controls the presentation of the travel package by using audio-visual images for illustrating the actual travel experience. The moderator records the potential travelers' reactions to the hypothetical travel package "as they take the journey" by using video cameras. The researcher can react immediately to traveler's requests regarding the package; change it and record the traveler's response to this "tailor made version of the package". The relationship makes it possible to test what travelers think of the travel package, and develop it according to consumer needs and wants. The conceptual framework used in the study is presented in Figure 1 on page 16. Focus group research provides the following benefits over the quantitative surveys in developing socio-cultural travel packages. First, focus groups are value added research because the research process lends itself to producing promotion material according to focus group participants' reactions. Second, it provides richer data and more readily implementable results than quantitative surveys.

Four major problems with quantitative research for developing socio-cultural travel packages are as follows: First, quantitative surveys provide only a one way interaction for obtaining consumer responses to the travel package. Second, quantitative research does not encourage the consumer to influence the travel package. An objective questionnaire eliminates the chance for the consumer to use his emotional and physical senses to evaluate the proposed travel experience. Third, there is no measure for interaction among potential travelers. Fourth, there is very little opportunity for the researcher to adapt the package to fit the traveler's needs. The key for utilizing the strengths of qualitative research is an experienced researcher who has expertise in both the focus group method and in the development of travel packages. The researcher has to use his or her expert judgment to examine these rich data and distinguish between salient, important and determining factors for consumer selection of socio-cultural travel packages.

CONSUMER SELECTION OF SOCIO-CULTURAL SPA TRAVEL PACKAGES

This qualitative research consisted of five focus groups with 7-14 participants. The research defined four potential market segments and three key criteria for selecting the spa travel package. The segments were: adventure seekers, naturalists, intellectuals and traditional spa goers. The matrix in Figure 2 describes the distinction between the key choice criteria for each segment.

The salient criteria are something that immediately stand out when consumers consider a vacation, but salient criteria do not necessarily motivate buying behavior. These criteria are to be expected (accommodations, transportation, etc.) from any travel package. Most travel packages have salient criteria at the consumer satisfaction level, however, this doesn't result in the consumer decision to choose a specific travel package.

The important criteria are significant but not decisive in the choice of a vacation.

The determining criteria lead to consumer choice of one spa travel package over another.

In this study the determining criterion for all segments was the opportunity to interact with native people.

The important criterion for the adventure seekers, naturalists and intellectuals was the unique environment. The traditional spa goers considered spa facilities/accommodations as an important criterion.

Spa facilities/accommodations were the salient criteria for all segments with the exception of the traditional spa goer for whom the unique environment was the salient criterion.

All of these three key criteria have different meanings for each of the four segments. This study defined these criteria but due to its proprietary nature, only general findings regarding socio-cultural travel will be reported.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The project grew from the basic focus group research to include a familiarization trip and an expert evaluation of the spas of the country. The results were used for package implementation, promotion of socio-cultural spa travel with travel videos, fitness videos, health magazine articles, radio coverage and newspaper articles.

Interactions among travelers and the local inhabitants were found to be very important for each market segment. The consumers in our focus groups clearly need people-to-people interaction to fulfill travel expectations. The following discussion addresses the significance of socio-cultural interaction for each market segment.

Adventure seekers look for unique experiences such as living and working with a farm family, hiking or camping in the wilderness, or enjoying a dinner typical of the country with local peoples. This market segment not only wants to observe customs but wishes to be a part of them. For example, these consumers want to explore the unknown in the company of natives who have a tradition of surviving in a harsh wilderness. Regarding the spa, these consumers want to learn the healthy life style of natives by experiencing spa as natives do; this is regarded as one more adventure.

Intellectuals want more than compulsory castles, mandatory museums and required ruins. This market segment objects to a tour guide who can only repeat what can be read in books or travel brochures. Intellectuals want to participate in cultural events such as folk dances, traditional banquets and market fairs where local people are available for interaction. This market segment wants to have meaningful discussions with colleagues in the country visited. They would like to compare notes with individuals in their own field and to experience being a professional in the country visited. The intellectuals are interested in history, arts and music of the country but only if presented in an authentic and unique environment. This market segment prefers a spa over a traditional hotel if it is located in a cultural, educational setting which also provides an opportunity to mingle with locals.

The naturalists seek a spiritual pilgrimage in an unspoiled wilderness. They are interested in observing and honoring traditions of the natives. These naturalists would enjoy living with a reindeer farmer and taking part in the daily routine of the family. They would like to travel at their own pace and to experience the country as natives do. This market segment prefers a spa because it provides a natural setting and encourages a healthy life style, more so than a holiday resort. In the spa the naturalists can join local people to seek nature and regeneration. This market segment is most attracted to areas of quiet, scenic beauty.

Spa goers want to visit a spa in a unique and exotic environment where they might learn about the country and its culture while enjoying daily spa activities and treatments. This market segment is interested in learning new and different methods of developing healthy lifestyles. Spa goers would like to experience the spa with the people of the country and interact with the native people who work in the spa.

Because of the relative newness of this type of research--developing and testing socio-cultural travel packages through focus groups--a summary of lessons learned is given to assist others interested in this research method. First, regarding consumer choice, the research method provided a clear picture of key criteria for development of travel packages that enhance socio-cultural interaction. All four market segments were interested in unique, exotic, authentic travel during which they could interact with individuals of the country. Although the spa itself is of interest to each market segment, an additional motive for visiting the spa is needed. As a result of the findings, it was suggested that the country itself needed to be marketed as a unique culture with excellent opportunities for socio-cultural interaction. All four market segments were interested in unique, exotic, authentic travel during which they could interact with individuals of the country. Second, regarding the development of travel packages, this research raised the issue of maintaining the balance between tourism and ecological systems. This balance must be maintained because if tourism is developed at the expense of ecology, then the area no longer is attractive to either local people or the tourist. The research approach suggested here may help to develop socio-cultural travel packages that maintain this balance which will benefit both tourists and locals.

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FIGURE 1

Conceptual Framework of Focus Group Research for Developing
Socio-Cultural Travel Packages

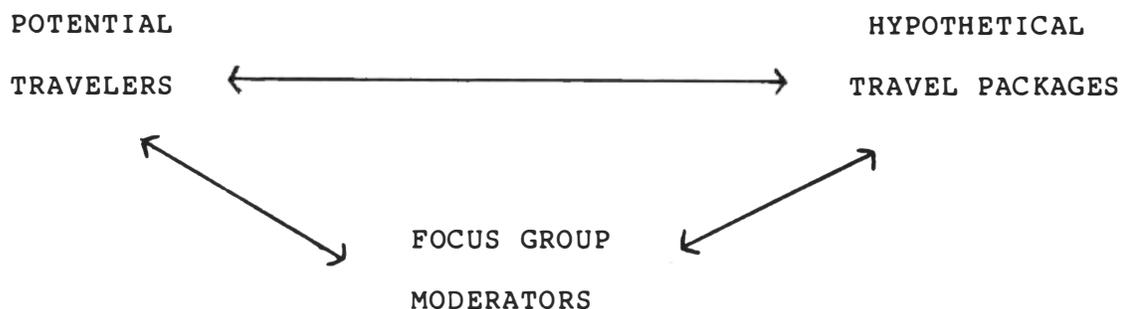


FIGURE 2

The Key Choice Criteria for Selecting a Travel Package

Choice Criteria

Market Segment	Native People	Unique Environment	Spa Facilities/ Accommodations
Adventure Seekers	D	I	S
Naturalists	D	I	S
Intellectuals	D	I	S
Traditionals Spa Goers	D	S	I

S = Salient Choice Criteria

I = Important Choice Criteria

D = Determining Choice Criteria