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A COMPARISON OF TOURIST AND TOURISM EXPERT
EVALUATIONS OF VACATION DESTINATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Less than two decades ago, Lunberg (1972) lamented what he considered to be a paucity of research on tourist motivation. In so doing he called for greater attention by researchers to the basic question "Why do people travel?" Had Lunberg adopted a broader view of travel (specifically leisure travel) as a consumption activity and the traveler (tourist) as a consumer, he would have found consolation in the motivational research cited in what was then an emerging literature on consumer behavior (Martineau 1957, Koponen 1960, Dichter 1964, Pessemier and Tiegert 1966, Kassarian 1971). This rapidly expanding literature has provided new opportunities for the tourism researcher to develop a greater understanding of leisure travel motivation, and for the commercial developer to improve predictability of the market success of specific resort or commercial recreation facilities and services.

In addition to asking why people travel, one might logically follow with questions such as "To where do people travel?" or "Why do people travel to one resort or attraction instead of to another?" The answers to these questions have obvious utility for those interested in attracting and serving tourists at a particular vacation destination. There is value in understanding why people travel, but that value is increased when there is also an understanding of the forces that influence the traveler to favor one destination or destination type over another. To be able to predict and explain the choice of travel destination, one must be able to accurately quantify the relative attractiveness of such destinations.

Defining and measuring vacation destination attractiveness has been the focus of several econometric research efforts and published articles in the tourism area (Van Doren 1967; Cheung 1972; Gearing, Swart and Var 1974; Var 1976; Ritchie and Zins 1978; Nuttall and Var 1978; Pearce 1982). Just as in Fishbein's (1967) quantification of attitudes, the basic assumption in the quantification of attractiveness is that certain attributes of a destination contribute differentially to its perceived ability to respond to motivational factors. A general model for attractiveness (based on a variety of determinant attributes) was given by Gearing et al in 1974, and he few more recent attractiveness models

used in tourism research have not varied greatly from the basic compensatory model structure.

Recent studies using attractiveness measures have also demonstrated methodological consistency in their use of 'expert opinions' in the quantification of criteria used in calculation of relative attractiveness. In addition to satisfaction of the researchers' need for expediency and efficiency, this practice is also based on the assumption that industry workers have a clear understanding of consumer needs and wants by virtue of their frequent interaction in the business place. The appropriateness of using experts as proxies for consumers in evaluating destinations and predicting destination choice behavior was questioned in this study.

The purpose of the study was to compare potential vacation travelers' perceptions of the attractiveness of different vacation destination types in Texas to those of 'experts' in the travel and tourism industry.

METHOD

The research was designed to facilitate a) the identification of distinct destination types within Texas (as perceived by the within-state tourism market), b) the identification of a set of determinant attributes that were relevant to all destination types, c) the measurement of vacation travelers' and experts' assessments of attribute centrality, and d) the measurement of vacation travelers' and experts' evaluation of attributes within each destination type. The study involved the collection and use of data from a representative sample of the potential and actual within-state vacation travel market (n=402) and a sample of tourism industry representatives (n=61).

T-tests were used to compare sample means for evaluations of attribute centrality (construct weights) and attribute quality within distinct destination types (construct scores). Attractiveness scores were calculated through the application of data to the Gearing et al (1974) model where the numerical measure of relative attractiveness is given as a sum of the products of perceived destination attribute (construct) scores and associated construct weights.

The process of designing the instrument used to measure destination attractiveness involved several stages of data collection and analysis. Content analysis and focus group interviews yielded data which were hierarchically clustered to identify the destination types to be used in the study. The repertory role construct test, repertory grid analysis and factor analysis were employed in identification of determinant attributes. A mail survey to randomly selected Texas residents provided data about the value of the attributes to the potential market, and about the respondents' perceptions of the quantity or quality of the attributes within the various within-state vacation destination types. A self-administered survey questionnaire was used to collect comparison data from a large group of experts (travel consultants, resort and attraction managers, tour operators, marketers, government officials,

etc.) attending the 1989 Texas Travel Summit.

RESULTS

The study resulted in the identification and description of 11 distinct vacation destination types as perceived by Texas residents in the context of proposed within-state vacation travel. It was demonstrated through this study that destinations defined by political jurisdiction or administrative function. The 11 destination types were identified as: Ranchlands, High Country, Gulf Coast, Park Areas, Historic Sites, Ethnic Settlements, Hispanic Areas, Urban Areas, Lake Areas, Resorts, and Camping Areas.

The results of the study also provided support for the use of Ritchie and Zins' (1978) list of determinant attributes in the measurement of destination attractiveness. The list included Natural Beauty and climate, Cultural and Social Characteristics, Recreation and Educational Opportunities, Shopping and Commercial Facilities, Visitor Services and Facilities, Peoples' Attitudes Towards Visitors, Distance and Accessibility, and Price Levels.

Weighting of the attributes according to the importance ascribed to each in the destination choice process differed (at the .05 level of statistical significance) between consumers and experts. The consumers viewed Natural Beauty and Climate as the most important determinant attribute while experts felt that Peoples' Attitudes Towards Visitors most affected the consumer's choice of vacation destination. Consumers and experts differed significantly in the value assigned to four of the eight attributes.

Comparison of construct scores revealed differences between the two populations in 51 of the 92 assessments. The greatest differences were noted in the evaluation of attributes of Resort Areas where, for 7 of the 8 attributes, expert ratings were different than those of consumers. For each of the vacation destination types, differences were observed in the magnitude of assigned attribute values as well as in the ranking of attribute scores.

With respect to the computed attractiveness scores of the 11 destination types, the sample of experts was consistently higher in its ratings than was the sample of consumers. The ranking of attractiveness scores differed dramatically for Resort Areas (which were ranked 9th by consumers and 2nd by the experts) and High Country (which was ranked 4th by consumers and 9th by the experts).

DISCUSSION

The appropriateness of the practice by tourism and travel market researchers of using panels of experts to represent consumer values, attitudes and preferences with respect to vacation destination choice must, in light of the results of this research, be seriously questioned.

In their enthusiasm for the tourism, resort or commercial recreation products that they manage or promote, industry experts tend to view these products as being of higher quality than do potential tourists and guests. This greater optimism is an important success criterion for promoters and managers, and would not be a concern if the ratings of attractiveness were consistently higher (or even lower) and had no effect on the ranking or measurement of relative attractiveness. This study provides an example of optimistic assessments by experts, but also reveals inconsistencies between expert and consumer rankings of destination types.

The failure of the experts in this study to accurately represent consumer perceptions and preferences suggests that the results of market research based on expert opinion should be viewed with caution and that many benefits can be realized by gathering data about a population directly from that population. These benefits include: a) a better understanding of competing and complementing attractions, b) more accurate prediction of travel behavior, c) less danger of developing a false sense of security from accepting one's own promotional hype, and d) improved ability to segment the market on the basis of relevant criteria.