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TOURISM THROUGH EVALUATION, ASSESSMENT AND MARKETING

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with research in tourism planning through a case study of a tourism development and marketing project in a rural community of Virginia. The rural community in the study initiated its tourism planning through an evaluation of the community's tourism potential which was followed by an assessment of the area's tourism potential and marketing program development. Issues associated with tourism planning in a rural community are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a growing realization in rural America that tourism is a significant contributor to the economic development process. Among many possible explanations for this trend, the most important could be the out-migration of rural manufacturing and changing economic base of the U.S. from an agricultural and industrial economy to a service economy. In the state of Virginia, many rural counties and municipalities are currently establishing a tourism development office or a travel and tourism committee as a part of an economic development department of the local government.

The purpose of this case study is to describe a TEAM (Tourism through Evaluation, Assessment and Marketing) approach to tourism planning which was successfully employed by Wise County, a rural coal-mining community in southwest Virginia. Wise County initiated its tourism planning through an evaluation followed by an assessment of its potential and the development of a marketing program. Issues associated with tourism development in the rural community will be discussed based on the experience of Wise County.

BACKGROUND

Coal mining has been the primary economic base for Wise County, Virginia, accounting for more than 20 percent of the jobs available in the area. However, decreasing demand of coal and resulting decline of coal production since early 1980's has resulted in economic hardship in the area in recent years. The unemployment rate in the coal mining areas of Virginia has been recorded considerably higher than that of the United States and Virginia overall in recent years. As an example, in 1986, when the unemployment rates for the U.S. and the state of Virginia were 6.7% and 4.4% respectively, the unemployment rate for the coal mining areas of Virginia was a significantly higher 14.0%.

Wise County's Chamber of Commerce has recognized the need for a more diversified economy so as to be less dependent on coal. Among the alternatives considered for promoting economic development was a plan to develop tourism. As a part of that plan, the County's Chamber of Commerce organized the Travel and Tourism Committee and assigned the Committee the responsibility to implement an effort entitled "TEAM Project."

TOURISM EVALUATION

The Travel and Tourism Committee, as the first step in planning tourism for the area, conducted a study to evaluate the area's tourism development potential. The study involved the identification of potential opportunities and drawbacks in developing tourism. This tourism evaluation phase included: (1) profiling the area's tourism resources through a content analysis of locally available literature; (2) a focus group with the participant of community leaders; and (3) visitor surveys. Each of these steps will be further explained in the following paragraphs.

First, the area's tourism related resources and the features which the local tourism community considered important were profiled based on the content analysis of printed materials describing the area's various points of interest. Second, a focus group study was conducted with the participation of the area's tourism community in order to generate ideas as to the potential opportunities and threats in developing the area as a tourist destination. The participants in the focus group consisted of 12 individuals representing various segments of the area's tourism related businesses such as a local hotel operator, a restaurant manager, a sporting goods store owner and a park administrator. Through a focus group, possible reasons why people travel to the area and potential tourist attracting features of the area were identified.

Based on the tourist directed literature content analysis and focus group study, a comprehensive list of potential tourist attracting features of the area was profiled and potential opportunities and drawbacks to tourism development were identified. The results indicated that the area's potential tourism related attributes included: (1) outdoor recreation opportunities such as camping, fishing and hiking; (2)

historical attractions such as Civil War battle fields, museums and historical buildings; (3) cultural attractions such as an outdoor drama, local festivals and the area's arts and crafts; (4) the inherent natural beauty of the area; (5) shopping opportunities at shopping malls, flea markets and craft stores; and (6) sports opportunities such as tennis and golf. Such information was useful in developing a questionnaire instrument to be used in a survey of visitors to the area.

Previous and current visitors to the area were contacted through mail and personal interview surveys. The purpose of the survey was three-fold: (1) to identify the attributes of the area which visitors consider important in making the decision to visit; (2) to identify the visitors' perceptions regarding the relative quality of the area's tourist attracting attributes; and (3) to identify the visitors' demographic and socio-economic characteristics and other potential tourist attracting features in the area.

The survey questionnaire consisted of three parts followed by a cover letter. The first part of the questionnaire was intended to identify the visitors' perception as to what they consider "important" in traveling to the area, while the second part was intended to identify visitors perception of the area in terms of the "performance" of the area's tourist attracting features. The items included in the questionnaire consisted of questions related to the following 10 areas: (1) availability of water sports opportunities (fishing, swimming, etc.); (2) availability of golf and tennis opportunities; (3) historical and cultural interests; (4) scenic attractions; (5) pleasant attitudes of the local people; (6) opportunity for rest and relaxation; (7) shopping facilities; (8) dining facilities; (9) availability of entertainment; and (10) availability of suitable accommodations. The inclusion of these items was determined based on an established view of tourism research and the area's tourism attribute profile obtained as a result of the above described first step of the project [1]. The third part of the questionnaire included questions related to the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the respondents plus questions related to the respondents' interests in potential recreation and tourism activities in the area. An open-ended question was included at the end of the questionnaire so that the respondents could write in any comments concerning tourism development and promotion for the area.

A total of 233 current and previous visitors to the area participated in the survey. Data analysis indicated that an average visitor to the area is 47 years of age traveling with spouses and/or other family members. A majority of the visitors in the study were married (73.5%) with an average household income of approximately \$35,000. Virginia residents accounted for 62% of survey respondents, followed by Kentucky and Tennessee residents by 25.5% and 5.2% respectively.

The respondents indicated that the most important attribute in selecting the area as a place to visit is the presence of suitable lodging accommodations. The next most important attributes were the friendly attitude of the people, the scenic beauty of the area, dining and restaurants, historical and cultural attractions, the opportunity for rest and relaxation, and water sports. The entertainment opportunity

(night life, etc.), shopping, and golf/tennis were ranked as less important attributes. With regard to the dimension of "performance" of Wise County in delivering various tourism features, the respondents indicated that Wise County is doing well in providing such attributes as the friendly attitude of people, scenic beauty, and the opportunity for rest and relaxation. The largest discrepancy between the importance and performance dimensions was noted in the areas of dining and restaurant facilities, lodging accommodations, historical and cultural attractions, water sports, and golf and tennis. The smallest discrepancy between the two dimensions was noted in the attitude of the local people, scenic beauty of the area, and the historical and cultural attractions.

The same survey questionnaire was administered to the area's tourism community leaders who participated in the focus group session described in an earlier section. The purpose of this was to compare and contrast the perceptions held by local tourism leaders regarding the performance (quality) of the area's tourism attributes with those held by visitors. Witter [2] reports that one of the factors which inhibit tourism development and promotion in any community is the so called "proud parent syndrome," wherein the local community, just like proud parents who believe their child is the prettiest and smartest, believe that their area offers a lot more than what the tourists to the area actually perceive.

The findings in this regard indicated that the area's tourism community leaders and the visitors to the area alike expressed that Wise County was performing better in the areas of (1) scenic beauty; (2) friendly attitude of people; (3) the opportunity for rest and relaxation; and (4) historical and cultural attractions. However, there existed small and large differences in responses between the Wise County tourism community leaders and those of visitors surveyed. It is interesting to note that, in contrast to the observation reported by Witter, the local tourism community in Wise County rated seven out of ten attributes lower than the travelers. This indicates that the local tourism community did not possess positive morale and attitudes toward their area's tourism potentials.

The last part of the survey questionnaire administered to visitors included 13 questions related to travelers' interests in potential tourism activities in the Wise County area. The 13 questions included here were based on the potential tourist attracting attributes of Wise County discussed during the focus group study. A high percentage of respondents indicated that they would be interested in (1) visiting the Wise County area to shop for mountain arts and crafts; (2) participating in train excursions throughout the area; (3) shopping for coal jewelry and crafts produced in the area and visiting a coal mining history museum; (4) attending festivals related to a "coal" theme and an "apple harvest" theme; and (5) staying at mountain cabins and cottages and/or camping in the area. The questionnaire included open-ended questions which asked respondents to express their other opinions and concerns about traveling to the Wise County area. It appeared from the visitors' opinions that the largest negative factors concerning visitors were (1) cleanliness of the area; (2) unfavorable road conditions; and (3) the difficulty of accessibility to the area.

ASSESSMENT OF TOURISM POTENTIAL

The study indicated the following three tourism features of Wise County as the area's strengths: (1) friendly and pleasant attitude of the area's people; (2) high quality scenic beauty; and (3) opportunity for rest and relaxation provided in the area. The study also indicated the weakness of the area in terms of its tourist attracting attributes. First, visitors regarded the availability of sleeping accommodations and food service facilities as highly important features when considering travel to the area; however, Wise County did not meet the visitors' expectations for these features. Second, visitors regarded the area's historical and cultural attractions, the opportunity for fishing and swimming, facilities for golf and tennis, and shopping opportunities as somewhat important features in considering travel to the area. Again, according to survey results, the Wise County area did not meet the visitors' expectations for these features.

Visitors were found to be interested in such tourism features as shopping for mountain arts and crafts, attending an apple and coal-theme festival, participating in train excursions in order to sight-see the area, visiting various coal related attractions, and camping or staying at mountain cabins/cottages. Among the drawbacks/challenges for the area's tourism development efforts were the area's negative image, including difficulty of accessibility, lack of cleanliness in the area; and a lack of supporting facilities for tourism such as good sleeping accommodations, dining facilities, and camping facilities.

MARKETING PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

The findings of the study assisted the Wise County Chamber of Commerce in developing and implementing specific tourism marketing action plans. First, the County has made efforts to enhance the area's "tourism product" by correcting the negative aspects of the area related to tourism. For example, travelers named difficulty of accessibility, coal dust and litter, and unfavorable road conditions as the primary negative aspects of the area as a tourist destination. As a measure to correct these negative aspects, the County has launched a community-wide program called "Clean Wise County" campaign. Efforts were also made to improve road conditions and general accessibility to the area.

At the same time, the County launched a community-wide tourism awareness program for the enhancement of the community's awareness of the area's potential for tourism development. Tourism and hospitality management courses were planned to be included in the curricula of a local community college for education of the area's tourism related personnel. The tourism awareness campaign was launched in order to help local citizens develop positive attitudes toward tourism development and better service the tourists to the area. The campaign included a series of seminars, guest speaker presentations, educational sessions, and training of those citizens in contact with area visitors. In an effort to enhance the area's tourism amenities, feasibility studies were planned

for a number of potential tourist service facilities (e.g. motels and restaurants) and tourist attracting features identified by the study. Finally, tour packages were developed for day-trips, over-night tours, week-end tours and "self-guided auto tours." These tours packaged the area's lodging establishments, restaurants and attractions.

Second, the current tourism product image strengths which were identified through the study provided guidelines for designing promotional themes. To emphasize the area's image strengths, the following specific promotional activities were undertaken: (1) Design and dissemination of new brochures to potential visitors to the area; (2) Organization of familiarization tours by travel writers specialized in rural and cultural tourism; (3) Study of the feasibility of installing a toll-free telephone number for the Chamber of Commerce; and (4) Advertisements in newspapers and magazines in potential market areas.

Third, in allocating the tourism promotional resources, the Chamber of Commerce implemented "focused marketing" by concentrating the Chamber's efforts on specific geographical areas (e.g. Bristol, Virginia/Tennessee, and Roanoke, Virginia) and special interest groups such as tour operating companies specialized in senior citizen motor coach tours. By targeting the marketing efforts at particular market segments which were more accessible and affordable, the Chamber could create its own position in the tourism market as a short distance travel destination.

SUMMARY

The purpose of this case study was to describe the TEAM (Tourism through Evaluation, Assessment and Marketing) approach to tourism planning which was successfully employed by Wise County in Virginia. Wise County initiated its tourism planning through an evaluation of the community's tourism potential which was followed by an assessment of the area's tourism potential and marketing program development. Issues associated with tourism development in the rural community included lack of morale by the local community with regard to the community's tourism potential and lack of data base for tourism planning.

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