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**EFFECT OF WASHINGTON STATE VISITOR
INFORMATION CENTERS ON TRAVEL BEHAVIOR**

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ABSTRACT

Profiles of visitors to Visitor Information Centers abound in the literature. However, little is known about the impact of these Visitor Information Centers on travel behavior. This study looked at individuals who stopped at a Washington State Visitor Information Center, picked up a questionnaire, and then returned their questionnaires after completing their trip. For the population that returned questionnaires the following influences from the information received were reported: 1) a little over 20% increase the length of their stay 2) almost 40% indicated they were influenced about destinations and attractions they visited 3) about 16% were influenced on their accommodations 4) about 7% were influenced by information about events. Visitor Information Centers in Washington

State represent a potential inexpensive opportunity to influence travel behavior.

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1990, the Washington State Tourism Development Division contracted for a study evaluating the effectiveness of Visitor Information Centers in the State of Washington. The focus of the study was on Visitor Information Centers that served as contact points for visitors entering the state by automobile. Part of the study's intent was to make an estimation of the effect of the Visitor Travel Information Centers on travel behavior. This study focused on visitors who stopped for information at Washington State Visitor Information Centers and the effect of that information on their travel behavior. The

results of this study have a bearing on the cost effectiveness of Visitor Information Centers and the effect of placing advertising material with Visitor Information Centers.

METHODS

This study was patterned after a 1988 Florida Division of Tourism study (1) of Welcome Centers. In that study, visitors were given a postage-paid postcard that contained a short questionnaire. Individuals were requested to return the postcard after her/his trip was completed. In return for filling out the questionnaire, a lapel pin was sent to respondents. The Washington State Tourism Development Division felt that this sampling scheme would be most appropriate for the information they wished to collect and the method was adopted.

A sampling schedule designed to obtain a total of approximately 200 questionnaires from each of the eight Washington State Visitor Information Centers (henceforth, VIC's) was created using the previous year's visitation information. The sampling scheme varied from VIC to VIC to standardize the length of time for each VIC to pass out enough questionnaires to obtain the desired 200 output. For two of the VIC's, local disruptions at the VIC's prevented this target number from being reached. The other sites exceeded or closely approached this target figure.

To ensure consistency, a researcher was sent to each of the State VIC's to instruct personnel on the proper handling of the questionnaires. Weekly contact was maintained by phone throughout the course of the study to ensure that any questions were answered in a prompt fashion. The questionnaires were distributed starting on

the July 4th holiday weekend and continued through mid-September.

In all, 7,464 questionnaires were distributed by the State VIC's for this study. A total of 1,541 were returned. The overall response rate was approximately 20.6%. This response rate approximated the response rate of the Florida study. This low response rate is a key limitation of this study. The need to obtain data from people who had already completed their trips made the acceptance of this low response rate unavoidable. Caution should be taken in generalizing this data. Further, please note that all locations were not equally or proportionally represented.

The returned postcards were coded and double entered into a computer database. The data was analyzed using SPSS P/C+. Descriptive frequencies were calculated to provide a profile of visitor responses to obtaining information from Washington State Visitor Information Centers.

RESULTS

The first finding of the study was that approximately 33% of respondents were first time visitors to Washington. However, 72.4% of the respondents reported that this was their first visit to a Washington State Visitor Information Center. In addition, 93.1% indicated that they were on a pleasure trip. Of all respondents, 56.5% indicated that the primary reason for stopping at the Visitor Information Center was to obtain some sort of information. Respondents reported at a rate of 88% that they received information from the Visitor Information Centers on attractions, activities, or destinations that they previously had not known about. In a related question, 21.5% of the respondents indicated that the

information they received caused them to add days to their stay in Washington State. The average number of reported extra days was approximately 2.6 days. The reported average stay by respondents was approximately 6.1 days.

Further probing questions about the effects of information received were also asked. When respondents were asked if they went to new, additional, or different destinations due to VIC information, 39.8% indicated they did. When asked the same question about new, additional, or different attractions, 39.3% indicated they did. The same question when concerning accommodations led to 16.2% of respondents saying they changed their plans. Lastly, 7.5% respondents indicated that they went to new, additional, or different events as a result of VIC information.

While making no claims to large-scale generalizability, some questions as to validity of the results should be addressed. The following represents a brief discussion of this issue.

The results of this study parallel the results of the Florida Division of Tourism Study (1) and a study by Gitelson and Perdue (2) in North Carolina. The similarities across different geographical locations enhances the validity of all the studies.

Using Visitor Information Centers to collect information about motorists has been somewhat validated by a study by Howard and Gitelson (3). This study found that visitors to Oregon Visitor Information Centers were very similar in character to all motorists. This lends some credence towards using Visitor Information Centers to study motorists' behavior.

The U.S. Travel Data Center states that 37 states provide funding to help support Visitor Information Centers. This study suggests that the efforts of Visitor Information Centers leads to some degree of financial return. Work by Tierney and Haas (4) produced results that also point to the positive effect of Visitor Information Centers and potential economic returns.

The results raise potential questions as opposed to providing definitive answers. However, the direction of these results suggest that future research might be profitable in establishing the specific effects of Visitor Information Centers on travel behavior.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Visitor Information Centers in Washington provide influential information to automobile travelers entering the State. This was particularly true for first time visitors to the State and to people on pleasure trips. Information oriented towards business travelers might be lost at Visitor Information Centers. Information targeted towards first time visitors and towards individuals on vacation appear to be well served by Visitor Information Centers in Washington State. In addition, the majority of people stopping at Visitor Information Centers appear to be doing so to obtain needed information.

Respondents who stopped at Visitor Information Centers reported that they received information about attractions, activities, or destinations that they previously did not know about. A significant number of respondents (21.5%) indicated that they lengthened their stays as

a result of the information they received. Such a result is encouraging for state and local officials who are attempting to encourage tourism industries in their areas. If the average extended stay were consistent across all visitors who stopped at VIC's the economic impact would be significant. However, a more intensive study would need to be conducted to validate the findings of this study.

For destinations and attractions, over 39% of respondents indicated that they were influenced by the information they received. For businesses that cater to recreationist this appears to present an opportunity to persuade potential purchasers of their products at a critical moment. For accommodations there appeared to be a similar, but smaller scale effect of 16.2%. However, an opportunity to influence approximately one out of every six vehicle travelers is significant for many advertisers. Lastly, for events, approximately 7.5% of respondents indicated they were influenced by new information. This may have been due to visitors already being well informed of major events. Or, it could have been due to a lack of information provided about events to Visitor Information Centers.

Alternatively, the timing of events may not correspond with the traveler's trip.

Travel behavior in Washington State appeared to be influenced by information provided by Visitor Information Centers for participants in this survey. While the results are far from conclusive, the trend of the results suggest that Visitor Information Centers represent a significant opportunity for commercial recreation enterprises to influence travel behavior. If the length of stay is extended for visitors by Visitor Information Centers, as suggested by this study, then investments in State Visitor Information Centers are returning a significant amount of money to the state.

In closing, Washington State Visitor Information Centers, appear to be good locations for information concerning resorts and commercial recreation enterprises. Pleasure travelers, new to the State, and staying for a significant period of time appear to be seeking information on such enterprises. Since placing information at Visitor Information Centers is often a matter of mailing an adequate number of brochures, this outlet for inexpensive advertising should not be overlooked.

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