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INFORMATION'S EFFECTS ON RESIDENTS' PERCEPTION OF TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Resident support for existing and future tourism development is an important issue facing tourism managers. This study addressed the relative influence of a public relations campaign on the attitudes of residents towards tourism development. Two random samples were drawn from two comparable Florida counties. Analysis revealed that, on average, residents of the community with a public relations campaign had more positive attitudes toward tourism development than did residents of the community with no campaign. Implications for future tourism public relations campaigns are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The travel industry has emerged as the largest single economic activity in the world (10). As such, many areas see tourism as an important sector in which to base their economies. In an effort to develop tourism to its fullest economic potential, governments at every level are establishing tourism promotional agencies.

At the local level, tourism development councils and visitor bureaus are prevalent. These agencies work toward increasing the influx of tourists to specific locales, thereby gaining the economic benefits of tourism (4). However, such actions have been predicated on the assumption that a host community is aware of and supports tourism development (7). Yet research shows this assumption may be incorrect (1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 9).

As local governments realize success in attracting greater numbers of tourists to their areas, more attraction and hospitality development will likely be needed. As the influx of tourists increases, little is known of the changes in residents' perceptions and attitudes toward tourism (6). Future tourism development efforts can be seriously hampered when a host community is not receptive to tourism. Because the tourists use parks, roads, water systems and other public facilities that a host community provides, the tourism sector may ultimately be limited by the community's willingness to pay for the maintenance and improvement of these facilities. Furthermore, a community that supports tourism development may be more tolerant of the inevitable problems associated with increased development. Such tolerance and support may also lead to the likelihood of more positive host-visitor interactions that, in turn, may lead to increased visitor satisfaction, positive word-of-mouth advertising and probability of repeat visits.

Previous research has found that community support for tourism is positively related to resident perceptions of the perceived positive impacts of tourism (7). These findings suggest that public relations programs designed to improve the image of tourism among residents, assuming local residents' attitudes are not intransigent and the public relations programs are effective, are a viable means of increasing local support for tourism. This study tested this assumption.

#### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Do residents of a host community with an on-going public relations campaign express more positive attitudes toward tourism development than residents of a similar host community with no such campaign?

#### METHOD

##### Sample

Two independent samples were selected for the analysis: one from a Florida county that had an on-going public information campaign; another that did not. The counties were matched based upon tourism sales tax revenues. This figure is used by the Florida Department of Commerce as a measure of tourism activity in an area. The county with the public information campaign ranked 10th out of the state's 67 counties in terms of the \$32,865,000 in net tourism sales tax paid in 1988. The county without a public information campaign ranked 11th with a net tourism sales tax of \$30,454,000 paid in 1988. Thus, the two communities were considered comparable on the basis of tourism activity (3).

A survey by the researchers had previously identified Brevard County as having the most developed on-going public information campaign in the state. The campaign began approximately nine months prior to the investigation and included Brevard County Tourism Week, regular press

releases mailed to area media, an educational slide show available upon request, and a speakers bureau comprised of Tourism Development Council members and affiliates. The campaign was more limited than the researchers would have liked in that it promoted only the benefits of tourism to residents. Many public relation theorists emphasize the importance of communicating both the positive and negative aspects of an issue in an effort to create more informed and more tolerant attitudes among residents (5). Recognizing that the process of informing residents about tourism development is somewhat new in the tourism industry, this campaign emphasizing the positive was deemed acceptable for this study.

To determine who would be surveyed in each county, a multistage cluster sampling design was employed. From each county, the three largest metropolitan areas were selected and all telephone prefixes for those cities compiled. The metropolitan areas were all coastal cities in close proximity to all existing tourism development. Employing the random digit dialing method, each prefix was matched with a four-digit number. Four attempts were made to contact one resident at each number. After four attempts to each operable number, the number was replaced. In each household, only one adult, age 18 or more, who had resided in the county at least one year was surveyed. These criteria were used to remove from the analysis those potential residents who could not genuinely assess both the positive and negative impacts of tourism over time. Yielded was a response rate of 69 percent for Brevard County (the county with the public relations campaign) and 73 percent for Sarasota County.

### Measures

The instrument used to assess respondents' attitudes towards existing and future tourism development was adapted from a similar instrument developed by Perdue, Long and Allen(7). Subjects were asked to respond to four attitudinal statements using a five point Likert Scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree). Two of the statements were used to test the hypothesis that residents of a host community with a public information campaign would hold more positive attitudes toward tourism development than residents of a community without a campaign.

Responses to the two attitudinal statements and a question used to assess if respondents were employed in tourism-related enterprises were employed to further test the comparability of two samples. The entire interviewing process took approximately three minutes to administer.

## RESULTS

### Description

Respondents were asked to select from list the employment type that best described their current status. As previously stated, these responses were used to assess the comparability of the two samples. In the Sarasota County sample (the county without the public relations

campaign), 45 percent of the 73 respondents were retired as compared to 29 percent in Brevard County sample. On the other hand, the Brevard County sample had a higher proportion of respondents employed in tourism-related enterprises (39 percent) than did the Sarasota sample (27 percent). Table 1 reveals the distribution of respondents' employment categories by county.

Further analysis revealed the samples were similar in terms of the proportion of respondents who were employed versus not employed in tourism-related enterprises. Eighty-eight percent of the Sarasota County sample were not employed in tourism-related enterprises as compared to 91 percent of the Brevard County sample. Likewise, 12 percent of the Sarasota County sample were employed in tourism-related enterprises as compared to nine percent in the Brevard County sample. Chi-square analysis revealed that the slight discrepancies between the two samples in terms of this employment dimension was not significant (D.F.:1, Chi-Square .496,  $p < .48$ ).

Further analysis underscored the fact that the two samples were comparable in terms of various attitudinal dimensions. No significant differences existed between the samples in terms of the extent respondents perceived they benefited from tourism development (D.F.: 140,  $t = .61$ ,  $p < .54$ ). On a five point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, the mean was 2.87 (S.D.: 1.03) for the Brevard County and 2.75 (S.D.: 1.22) for the Sarasota County samples.

Perdue, Long and Allen (7) found that attitudes toward tourism development were generally more positive in communities where residents perceived the economic outlook of the county as less bright. Conversely, communities with positive attitudes concerning the future of their community expressed more negative attitudes towards tourism development. In this analysis, no significant differences existed between the two samples in terms of the future of their county. When asked if the future of their county looked bright, the mean was 3.65 (S.D.: .82) for the Brevard County sample and 3.71 (S.D.: .86) for the Sarasota County.

#### Information Acquisition

The Brevard County sample was asked if they recalled seeing or hearing any information associated with the public relations campaign. Of the 69 respondents, 15 (22 percent) recalled seeing or hearing various aspects of the campaign, 50 (73 percent) did not, and 4 (6 percent) were uncertain. When asked where they recalled seeing or hearing the information, eleven subjects indicated an article in the newspaper; two through television, one on the radio; one at a presentation, and four in an other category.

#### Hypothesis Test

Both criteria used to test the hypothesis that residents of a community with a public relations program would express more positive attitudes

toward tourism development than residents of a community without such a campaign was supported in the direction predicted (See Table 2). On average, residents of the county with a public information campaign (e.g., Brevard County) responded more favorably towards attracting more tourists than did residents of a community with no such campaign (e.g., Sarasota). Conversely, residents of the county without a public relations campaign, on average, responded more favorably towards having less tourism than residents of the community with a campaign.

## DISCUSSION

Findings of this study indicate that resident attitudes toward tourism development may not be intransigent and that a modest public relations program designed to improve the image of tourism among residents may be a viable means of increasing local support for tourism. In this data set drawn from two comparable communities, residents of the community with a tourism information campaign expressed more positive attitudes towards tourism development than residents of a community with no such campaign.

The authors, however, emphasize that these findings should be considered as tentative evidence due to the one important limitation of this study. The methodology employed in this research has an inherent weakness in that it cannot establish the existence of a cause and effect relationship. In other words, it cannot be conclusively determined that other unmeasured and extenuating circumstances may have played a role in affecting one community's receptiveness to tourism more so than another. Replication of these findings across other comparable communities should strengthen our confidence in the ability of public relations campaigns to influence residents receptiveness towards tourism.

Future researchers attempting to measure the effectiveness of public relations campaign are advised to use several different methodologies in an attempt to replicate their findings. If the findings remain consistent across several methodologies, more convincing evidence can be offered that the findings reflect a true nature of the relationship, not simply an artifact of the research method used.

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Table 1  
 Frequency Table of Employment Categories of Respondents in the  
 Brevard County and Sarasota County Samples

Employment Category Total	Brevard		Sarasota		No.
	No.	%	No.	%	
retired	20	29	33	45	53
unemployed	12	17	5	7	17
employed, non tourism	27	39	20	27	47
employed, tourism	4	6	8	11	12
self-employed, non-tourism	1	2	4	6	5
self-employed, tourism	2	3	1	1	3
housewife	3	4	2	3	5

\* Note: Percentages do not sum to 100% due to rounding.



Table 2  
 Comparisons of Brevard County and Sarasota County in Terms of  
 Subjects Attitudes Towards Tourism Development

Item	Brevard	Sarasota	t-value	p-value
My county should attract more tourists*	3.4 (1.03)	3.0 (1.1)	2.14	.034
I would prefer less tourism **	3.4 (1.0)	2.9 (1.1)	2.67	.009

\* Recorded on a scale of 1 to 5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree)

\*\* Recorded on a scale of 1 to 5 (strongly agree to strongly disagree)