

1996

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Recommended Citation

Lin, Fen-Ju and Ralston, Linda S. (1996) "The Influence of Attitudes, Subjective Norms and Perceived Behavioral Controls on Hotel Guests' Intention to Return," *Visions in Leisure and Business*: Vol. 15 : No. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/visions/vol15/iss2/4>

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THE INFLUENCE OF ATTITUDES, SUBJECTIVE NORMS AND PERCEIVED BEHAVIORAL CONTROLS ON HOTEL GUESTS' INTENTION TO RETURN

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ABSTRACT

Customer retention is important to innkeepers to increase repeat business; however, little research has been done to explain and predict why some hotel guests intend to return to a certain hotel when they travel, and others do not. By applying the theory of planned behavior (1), this study examined the factors that influenced the guests' attitudes toward returning, subjective norms with respect to returning, perceived behavioral controls over returning, and guests' intentions of returning from a population of past guests of a hotel. Besides a guest's attitudes toward returning, results of this study have indicated that social influences and situational factors might have an additional impact on a guest's decision to return to a hotel. Factors associated with guests' intention to returning will be utilized in the development of a standardized instrument.

INTRODUCTION

An oversupply of rooms in the lodging industry has caused hotels difficulty in maintaining occupancy rates and raising room rates to profitable levels (16). "Occupancy rates of U.S. hotels slipped steadily from a high of 71% in 1979 to 60.9% in 1991" (Fortune, April 1992, p.96). According to Anderson and Fornell (5), "customers are more costly to acquire than to retain; customer retention should be one of the highest priorities of a business enterprise" (p. 241). Therefore, factors that affect hotel guests' decision to return and their actual return might be important to innkeepers for improving occupancy rates, raising room rates and gaining market share. A study conducted by Cronin and Taylor (7) concluded that consumer satisfaction has significant effect on purchase intention. They argued that a customer's loyalty depends critically on the overall level of satisfaction with the current supplier and the availability of alternatives. Although satisfied experience will reinforce the repurchase intention, Geva and Goldman (9) found that a positive attitude of a specific

transaction did not always lead to a repurchase. They concluded that other factors might have a stronger impact on the intention to return. Therefore, it is important to understand what the antecedent(s) of the intention to return is for the customer. More simply stated, innkeepers might ask themselves what factors influence hotel guests to consider returning. Unfortunately, little research has been completed that would explain what attributes or amenities might affect a guest's intentions to return.

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of hotel guests' intention to return and the factors that influence this intention to return. Specifically, we examined the factors which influenced the guests' attitudes toward returning, subjective norms with respect to returning, perceived behavioral controls over returning, and guests' intentions of returning from a population of past guests of a hotel. The theoretical framework for this research was derived from Ajzen's (1) theory of planned behavior, which was an extension of the theory of reasoned action (4).

CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The theory of planned behavior (Figure 1) proposes that intentions to perform different behaviors can be predicted with high accuracy from attitudes toward the behaviors, subjective norms with respect to the behaviors, and perceived behavioral controls (1, 11). Ajzen holds that the three predictors have motivational implications for behavioral intentions.

Attitudes toward the behavior refer to the degree to which a person has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation of the behavior.

Attitudes function as a predisposition to behave in a certain way that is beneficial to an individual (14). People usually exert influence on their own motivation and behavior by enlisting influence on their evaluative and tangible self incentives (6).

Subjective norms refer to the perceived social pressure to perform or not perform the behavior. Consumers are seldom free from social influences that persuade or constrain their choices. Sometimes, consumers will trade off the satisfaction of making completely independent decisions for the social acceptance by peers or family (12).

Perceived behavioral controls refer to the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior. When people intend to perform behaviors, they are concerned with the opportunities, resources and barriers in their possession (11).

METHOD

The study's questionnaire was constructed according to guidelines established by Ajzen's (1) theory of planned behavior. Since there have not been any previous studies in the area of hospitality, it was necessary to first elicit the salient behavioral, normative and control beliefs related to the hotel guests' intention to return. A downtown hotel that reported a higher than average occupancy rate was selected for the pilot study. This hotel serves a variety of markets including both pleasure and business travelers. According to Doll and Ajzen (8) direct experience increases the accessibility of attitudes and attitude-behavior consistency. Therefore, questionnaires were distributed by the front desk clerks to guests during the check in process according to a systematic random

sampling plan (one in 25). Since business travelers may not have the ability to select the hotel which they utilize, the hotel was instructed to exclude guests paying for their lodging with corporate and business accounts and/or billings.

The questions were formatted in open-ended and rank order formats. The first section of questions was designed to obtain general information from the participants, such as the purpose of the trip, frequency of travel, and experience of staying at the selected hotel. A second group of questions was formulated similarly to the past studies of the theory of planned behavior to leisure participation (2) with modifications for the hotel industry. Both positive and negative opinions were asked about the behavioral, normative, and control beliefs regarding the intention to return to that hotel. To elicit the salient behavioral beliefs, participants were instructed to list the possible advantages and disadvantages regarding their intention to return. In a similar format, participants were requested to list any group of people who might support or who might not support their actual return to this hotel. For the control beliefs, participants were asked to list any factor that might facilitate or interfere with the intention to return.

ANALYSIS

Ajzen (1) suggests that the five to nine items utilized in the closed ended questions for each category (attitudes toward the behaviors, subjective norms with respect to the behaviors, and perceived behavioral controls). The most salient beliefs were selected based on modal salient approach, which uses frequency ranking of responses from the open-ended questions.

RESULTS

A total of 50 questionnaires was completed by pleasure travelers to the selected hotel during the months of April and May 1994. The analysis consisted of frequency and rank ordering of each of the open-ended questions. Ajzen (1) suggests that the items utilized in the closed ended questions be limited to a minimum of five and a maximum of nine factors for each category (attitudes toward the behaviors, subjective norms with respect to the behaviors, and perceived behavioral controls). The analysis resulted in the most frequently mentioned factors in each category being selected for development of closed-ended questions for future study of hotel guests' intention to return. The most salient outcome beliefs for the attitudes toward behavior were as follows: (1) easy freeway access, (2) easy airport access, (3) closeness to local attractions, (4) food service, (5) convenient parking, (6) convenient reservation for other chain hotel, (7) fax, (8) availability of airport shuttle. The most salient referents for the subjective norms were (1) travel agent, (2) previous customers, (3) hotel staff, (4) American Automobile Association, (5) family, (6) convention organizers, (7) employer. The most important salient control beliefs for the perceived behavioral controls were (1) convenience for dining, (2) quiet rooms, (3) secure rooms, (4) better registration, (5) fast checkout (6) negotiated discount. The analysis resulted in the most frequently mentioned factors in each category have been used for development of closed-ended questions for a study of hotel guests' intention to return.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of hotel guests'

intention to return and the factors that influence this intention to return. Specifically, we were successful in examining specific factors influencing guests' attitudes toward returning, subjective norms with respect to returning, perceived behavioral controls over returning, and guests' intentions of returning from a population of past guests of a hotel. The results of this study have been essential in the drafting of closed ended questions to be utilized in the development of a standardized instrument. This instrument may be used to randomly sample guests at several different hotels and resorts from different geographic regions, by that making the future results generalizable the hospitality industry. The closed ended questions will require respondents to estimate their intention of returning (BI), indicate the strength of the intention predictors including attitudes toward the behavior (ATT), subjective norms (SN), and perceived behavioral control (PBC). The questionnaire will follow the suggested format proposed by past researchers (2, 3, 15), questions about evaluation (e.g., "good-bad," "important-unimportant") and probability (i.e., "likely-unlikely") will be

measured by a seven point polar scale. Sample questions were formatted as follows:

I intend to return to the Olympus Hotel on my next trip to this area.

1___2___3___4___5___6___7
Likely Neither Unlikely

At the Olympus Hotel, I will have considerate and friendly hotel personnel to assist me.

1___2___3___4___5___6___7
Likely Neither Unlikely

Convenience to the interstate freeway is _____.

1___2___3___4___5___6___7
Very Neither Not Important Important

Previous customers have recommended that I should stay at the Olympus Hotel on my next trip to this area.

1___2___3___4___5___6___7
Never Sometimes Often

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Figure 1

