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**AN ANALYSIS OF THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE RESORT
INDUSTRY IN ATTRACTING AND SERVING GUESTS WITH PHYSICAL
DISABILITIES**

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ABSTRACT

Resort planners and operators face many challenges as well as enjoy many opportunities in serving the needs of guests with physical disabilities. These challenges and opportunities are in the decision-making, activity and reference stages of the guests' resort experience. A study of travelers with physical disabilities and the competitive position of one destination serving that market segment is presented in this article. Points of examination include information search behavior, purchase facilitation, physical and social barriers, and evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

For most resort guests or general tourists, travel related choices and leisure activities are rarely, if ever, totally unconstrained. The barriers that face all clients or potential clients, despite having received very little attention in the recreation or tourism literature, may be critical factors in the decision-making process regarding vacation travel, as well as the generation and

realization of the psychological outcomes of the resort experience (2).

While every client or guest undoubtedly experiences barriers to their travel and leisure participation, persons with physical disabilities, in particular, have been identified as being disproportionately affected by intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural constraints (3, 4). People with physical disabilities are conservatively estimated to constitute ten percent of the world's population, and estimates have indicated that thirteen percent of all travelers have some kind of physical. It is believed that this proportion is steadily increasing. Just over a decade ago, Rehabilitation International issued the following indictment of the travel industry:

Essentially, the most important and pervasive existing barriers to disabled travelers are those which affect long-distance mobility and involve those travel services being offered to the public. There exists a vast worldwide "service complex" of businesses, organizations and facilities which is organized to offer transportation, entertainment, and a

galaxy of support services to the general public. Neglecting the needs of the disabled traveler to a great extent, this service complex has become regimented, standardized and institutionalized to the point where people with problems of [disabilities] are excluded due to an overwhelming plethora of barriers.

To a large degree, that indictment still applies today. Even with new facilitative legislation that serves to reduce some structural barriers for travelers with physical disabilities, the potential for the resort and commercial recreation industry to respond to an identified social need and to capitalize on a growing market opportunity has not been fully realized. To do so requires, among other things, a comprehensive strategy for encouraging the development and marketing of appropriate products and packages for persons with disabilities in both domestic and international markets.

This paper presents the results of a study of the travel industry of Manitoba, Canada and its ability to meet the needs of persons with physical disabilities. It identifies and discusses the challenges and opportunities faced by providers of leisure and tourism services in developing and marketing products for this important target population. The study was conducted in 1995 for two government departments (Travel Manitoba and Tourism Canada) with responsibility for supporting, through product and market development, domestic and international tourism markets respectively. The study involved an analysis of existing and potential tourism markets, an inventory and evaluation of existing tourism products in the province of Manitoba, and a review of competing destinations/products. The results provide a basis for the development of a marketing strategy

designed to attract and meet the needs of resort guests and general tourists and with physical disabilities.

It should be noted that, in this paper, the term disability refers to any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner, or in the range, considered normal. Physical disabilities considered to qualify individuals as members of the target market included those in the areas of agility, hearing, mobility, or vision.

METHODS

Several types of data were collected and a variety of appropriate data collection techniques were employed in this study. A survey of participants (with and without disabilities) at a national conference of Canadian Independent Living Centers was conducted. Over half (57.6%) of the 340 delegates who attended the conference responded to a comprehensive survey questionnaire which asked for information about their travel behavior, attitudes, interests, needs, and experiences in the region. Of the respondents, 93 had physical disabilities. In addition, face to face interviews with hotel/resort, attraction, shopping center and transportation facility operators were conducted and followed by site inspections to verify conditions and services described in printed or other promotional materials. Inspections were conducted at 9 large hotel/resorts, 15 major attractions, 4 shopping centers, and 1 transportation facility. Inspectors used the Barrier Free Standards Worksheet to maintain consistency in their reviews. In addition, a detailed examination of an extensive collection of state/provincial and international tourism promotional materials was conducted. The purpose of this

examination was to determine the manner and extent to which the special needs of persons with disabilities were addressed in general information pieces. Analysis of the contents of promotional materials directed to a potential traveler/resort guest with a physical disability was also undertaken. These materials were selected from the general offerings of 13 states and 3 overseas destinations. The published property directories of 6 major hotel/motel chains were also analyzed in order to ascertain the readily apparent degree of accommodation afforded travelers with disabilities. In addition, all entries to the AAA/CAA Tour Book and the national hotel association's Official Guide to Hotels and Motels were reviewed. Data collection also involved surveys of tour operators and car rental agencies. Finally, during the course of the study, focus group discussions were held with familiarization tour participants from France, Italy and the eastern United States. Another focus group was convened during the Independent Living Centers conference.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tourists usually begin their travel experience long before they are physically transported from their home environment to the travel destination. The total travel experience involves tourist activities in their temporally defined stages of consumption (1). The first stage is the decision making stage during which the consumer becomes aware of a tourism opportunity, searches for and evaluates information about the opportunity, facilitates the actual travel by making commitments and other necessary arrangements, and engages in speculation. The second stage is the vacation activity stage in which the tourist presents him/herself and participates in the activities for which the tourist decided to travel. The

third stage is the reference stage. At this stage of the experience, the tourist has usually returned home and is engaged in recollection, approbation or commendation, and evaluation for the purpose of future decision making. For the provider of tourism and resort products (experiences), there are challenges as well as opportunities at each stage of consumption. Some challenges and opportunities are particularly important to recognize when targeting the persons with physical disabilities market.

The results of this study demonstrated that, at the decision making stage, persons with physical disabilities find it especially challenging to get the information they need about destinations, attractions and the special services that they sometimes require. When service or destination-specific information is available but contains no information about special services for persons with disabilities, the potential traveler perceives that the service/destination managers/operators do not know how to deal with their disability. After the most commonly cited constraints to leisure travel (i.e. lack of time and lack of money), the Conference sample of travelers with disabilities identified "too many places don't know how to deal with my disability" and "it's hard to get the information I need" as their most significant constraints to pleasure travel. A significant portion of the market also felt less inclined to travel because of lack of encouragement from the tourism industry to do so. They identified television, radio and print media advertising which almost universally featured healthy, young and active tourists who had no apparent disabilities. The message they too often perceived was "Welcome to all who can participate in our active, challenging adventure products."

At the decision-making stage of the pleasure travel experience, marketers and managers of resorts and tourist destinations, attractions and services have several opportunities with respect to serving persons with physical disabilities. To facilitate the information search process, the supplier can ensure that published information about the attraction contains details about accessibility and alternative activities for individuals with physical limitations. While many of these details are most appropriately integrated into generally distributed information pieces, there may be some circumstances wherein the information should be included in a special publication for persons with disabilities. Participants in this study felt that integrated information was preferable and that disability specific details should be provided to travel arrangers or made available to individuals through disability service organizations.

Another opportunity for tourism suppliers and resort marketers is in providing extended service options to persons with disabilities. In the interest of satisfying the needs of all clients/guests, activity providers could offer and facilitate alternative forms of participation in activities that might not, by nature, be universally accessible.

During the vacation activity stage of consumption, the greatest challenges faced by persons with physical disability relate to accessibility and personal dignity. While certain legislation and regulations (e.g. Americans with Disabilities Act) have greatly improved accessibility at airports, hotels and public attractions, a fully accessible network of tourist services was a rare find for this sample of travelers with disabilities. Respondents frequently identified problems with accessibility for services sought between the airport and resort, between the resort and area attractions, and

at the attractions themselves. The significance of these gaps in accessibility was likened by one respondent to that of having quality care for children at school and at home but no crosswalk on the busy street that separates them.

With the exceptions previously noted, physical and structural accommodations for persons with disabilities were, in the experiences of the Conference sample, considered to be generally adequate throughout North America and in the region being studied. Social accommodations were, however, often cited as being inadequate. Included in the list of industry failings were the staff/guest interactions that, most often and quite unintentionally, reduce the esteem of the guests with physical disabilities. Lack of apparent concern for safety and security, inflexibility in resort activity or tour packages, punitive financial surcharges, and incompatibility of support structures were weaknesses identified by a significant portion of the sample.

During the reference stage of consumption, persons with physical disabilities were most challenged by the lack of reference points for assessment. This was further complicated for some by a physical inability to communicate or articulate their assessment. In addition, a matter of concern for resort and destination service providers is the observed lack by this important market segment of recognition of service providers. This concern is based on the fact that brand or corporate recognition is important in the industry, especially as it relates to word-of-mouth promotion and client referrals. The study re-emphasized the importance of this type of promotion in attracting the growing market of persons with physical disabilities.

The results of this study contribute much to a greater understanding of the specific needs and opportunities that present themselves in serving the persons with disabilities market. The results can also guide managers and

marketers in the resort and commercial recreation industry in their efforts to be more responsive to and more effective in serving all consumers of their products and services.

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