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INFORMATION AND TRAVELER DECISIONMAKING

By Maureen H. McDonough and Gary A. Ackert



Knowing when and how consumers get information plays a key role in promotion and has very important implications for the tourism industry. Properly timed and placed information can mean the difference between successfully reaching the right consumers or wasting your money on ineffective promotion.

MARKETING—THE PROCESS CONTINUES

In the tourism industry, marketing is a process that never stops. It is essential that you have some understanding of what this process is all about. There are two terms that are central to this process and that need to be understood: market and marketing.

MARKET—

Traditionally a market was a place where consumers went to exchange goods, services, or money. This definition puts emphasis on the place of the transaction, not on the consumer. Think about the following terms: roadside markets, farmers' markets, the market place, and supermarkets. They are all places where people go to buy and sell.

Marketing experts have expanded this definition to include the consumer. A market now refers to potential customers who share a specific need or want and who might be willing to exchange something to satisfy that need or want. In other words, a market is a group of consumers who have similar needs or wants and who are willing to buy or sell something to fulfill them. For example, a group of consumers who may want to visit the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village is considered a market.

There are many markets for tourism businesses, but it is impossible for any one business or community to reach them all. You need to select one or more *specific* markets, e.g. married couples, single parents, family groups, elderly couples, campers, or first time visitors that you want to use your goods or services. These are called your *target markets*.



MARKETING—

Marketing is the process of managing the exchange of goods, services, and money to satisfy the needs of consumers, or the market.

MARKETING VS. SELLING

There are two approaches to get consumers to use your product. Are you selling or are people buying? Your choice will determine how well you are able to market your product or service. Selling is really only a small part of marketing.

The Selling Approach

This approach focuses on the product(s) or service(s) offered. It is based on the belief that the only thing necessary to sell the product(s) or service(s) is to overcome consumer buying resistance. It is not necessarily concerned with consumers' needs, but attempts to get consumers to buy something whether they need it or not.

This process starts by looking at what product(s) or service(s) the seller has and selling them without any concern for what consumers need or want. It is not concerned with consumer satisfaction, but assumes that dissatisfied consumers can be wooed back later.

The Marketing Approach

This approach focuses on consumer needs and acknowledges the power and influence of a dissatisfied consumer. It is based on the belief that there will be no consumer buying resistance to overcome if the product(s) or service(s) meets their needs.

This process starts with identifying consumers' needs and wants and then producing product(s) or service(s) to meet them. Consumer satisfaction is critical.

Of these two approaches, the marketing approach is more effective. For example, take lemonade.



—Selling Lemonade

We will sell lemonade because

- a) We have a lot of lemons and
- b) We make the best lemonade.

—Marketing Lemonade

The weather is hot and people need something cold to drink. People like lemonade. Lemonade really quenches thirst and is easy for people to drink as they walk along the sidewalk. Therefore, we will sell lemonade.

GETTING INFORMATION—THE CONSUMERS' WAY

One of the biggest needs consumers have is to get information so they can decide what to buy or where to buy it. Consumers have different preferences for where to get information, just as they have different preferences for food, entertainment, etc. It is extremely important to understand the information preferences of your target market so that you can get your message to them. Otherwise, your promotion becomes a hit or miss venture.

Communication preferences will determine the source of your target market's information. Sources of information are divided into two categories, formal and informal.

A formal source is one that you plan to use. Generally, you control the information that is presented through the source and how it is presented. Examples of formal sources include television, radio, newspapers, community newsletters, and brochures.

An informal source of information is one that you have not planned to use. You have very little control over what information is presented and little control over how it is presented. Examples of informal sources of information include friends, family members, relatives, repeat visitors, and word of mouth.

It should be noted that even though they can be divided into two categories, information sources actually form a spectrum



ranging from formal to informal. Many of these sources, especially press related sources (news, feature or human interest stories, for example), are ones people choose to use, yet they do not have much control over how their information is used or presented. These types of sources are still considered to be formal sources because some control can be established and maintained by having a good working relationship with the local press.

Your target market's preferences also influence the channel through which your market gets its information and when they look for it. The channel that your market chooses for information is dependent on whether or not they prefer formal or informal information sources. When they get information will depend on whether or not they need their information before their trip, during the trip, or when they arrive at their destination.

Recently, a two year study was completed by the Department of Parks and Recreation Resources at Michigan State University of traveler information networks in Michigan. This study determined the kinds and sources of information used by groups of travelers both before their trip and upon arrival at their recreation destination. Results indicated that travelers made use of information at three different times, or stages, during a trip. They show preferences for specific channels and specific types of information from these channels at each stage.

The first time that travelers make use of information is before the trip starts. This stage is broken down into two categories: awareness and actual trip preparation.

Before travelers can make use of a destination, they have to be aware of it. They need to know it exists. The study suggests that travelers learn about their particular destination primarily through informal channels. Of the respondents in the study, over 60% said that they first learned of their destination through friends, families, other word of mouth, and/or past trip experience. Formal channels play a smaller role in aware-



ness. Thirteen percent surveyed said that they were made aware of their destination through the mass media or publications.

Informal sources were preferred over formal sources in the traveler's trip preparation. In making their choices about what to do on the trip, where to stay, and how to get there, travelers chose to talk to repeat visitors going on the trip with them, friends who were not going on the trip, or other people in their traveling group. Newspapers, the major formal source mentioned, were important only in choosing local community events travelers wanted to explore. Of the informal sources, repeat visitors were the number one choice for all types of information, while friends not going on the trip were second.

The second time travelers make use of information is when they are traveling to their destination. Thirty-three percent of all travelers sampled made use of information during this time. Formal sources such as travel information centers, billboards and signs and informal sources such as people outside the group were the main channels of information about tourist attractions, recreational activities, and places to eat in the destination area. Of those who used these channels during the trip, 22% changed their plans for their trip based on information they acquired.

The third time that travelers use information on a trip is when they arrive at their destination. At this point, travelers rely primarily on informal channels. Employees at lodging facilities, campgrounds, and repeat visitors in the group were the main channels of information on area recreation activities. For deciding where to eat, where to stay, or what attractions in the area to visit, many people chose to visit places that they saw while driving.

The results of the study show that travelers use different channels of information for different types of information at different times during a trip. The most common channels were informal and included friends and family, repeat visitors, and lodging employees. Formal channels were used in a limited capacity and primarily at the beginning of a trip.



IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETING AND PROMOTIONAL PLANNING

What does all this suggest? One thing that is needed is a shift in emphasis from the mass media and other formal channels to informal channels. Informal channels often have more influence on travelers than do any of the traditionally used mass media channels. Examples are:

- A community's hospitality and service
- A community's image and atmosphere
- Community awareness and pride
- Family members and friends
- Informed employees
- Repeat visitors in groups.

To effectively market your tourism resources, you need to seriously consider using these channels. Informal channels can be used to:

- Pass out brochures for people to take home
- Make sure your employees know what recreational activities are available in the area and how to get to them
- Start a "reference chain" with businesses in your community. Refer people to them and have them do the same for you.
- Be hospitable—make travelers feel at home.
- Keep your community clean and attractive.
- Create a "community atmosphere" around your community theme (See Extension bulletins E-1957 and E-1938).

These are some of the ways that you can use informal channels. This list is not exhaustive. The only limits you have in using informal channels are the types of informal channels your target market prefers to use and your imagination in using these channels.



A second conclusion that can be drawn from the above study is the need to identify your target market as clearly and concisely as possible. This will allow you to identify:

- Your target market's information needs
- Where they get their information
- When they look for it.

CONCLUSION

Research shows that travelers prefer to use different information sources to get information at different stages of a trip. Being able to identify and understand your target market's preference is an important step in developing an effective promotional strategy. This bulletin was written to give a basic understanding of what these preferences are.

People make the difference between a successful or unsuccessful effort. Effective marketing means that you have a good enough understanding of your target audience so that you can put your information where people look for it when they need it!

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Tourism Information Series

The Tourism Information Series is for those interested in tourism development. To obtain the series, contact your county Extension office. Look in the white pages under County Government.

1. E-1937, Tourism and Its Significance in Local Development
2. E-2004, Tourism Planning
3. E-1958, Developing A Tourism Organization
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5. E-1992, Feasibility Analysis in Tourism
6. E-1939, Developing A Promotional Strategy
7. E-1957, Creating A Promotional Theme
8. E-1940, Information and Traveller Decision Making
9. E-1938, Managing Tourism Information Systems
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