Improving the Marketing Efforts of State Tourism Organizations in the U.S.

Kevin Naaman

Indiana University – Bloomington, Bloomington IN

Haoai Zhao

Indiana University – Bloomington, Bloomington IN

Lynn M. Jamieson

Indiana University – Bloomington, Bloomington IN

Abstract

BACKGROUND

The number of convention sites has increased drastically within recent decades. Yet, little is known about the efficacy of their marketing tactics.

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this exploratory study was to generate qualitative themes from forty-six state tourism offices' (STO) tourism collateral materials (TCMs). This information is intended to be used by researchers to develop a research agenda concerning the efficacy of STOs marketing success with respect to their usage of TCMs.

METHODS

The selected sample included cities within each state that sent TCMs to prospective groups through meeting planners. Requests for the materials were made to the STOs by using their "800" number, thus replicating what a meeting organizer would do when seeking information about prospective convention sites. Two researchers used a three-pass manual coding system to analyze the STO documents.

RESULTS

Three major themes from the STO documents emerged: (1) local attractions, (2) culture, and (3) outdoor pursuits. These themes represented the tourist experiences marketed through the TCMs. Some STOs were found to provide clear instructions, safety tips, contact information, and other relevant information so that conventioneers could participate in tourist activities with minimal planning while traveling for business.

Kevin Naaman is a Doctoral Student in the School of Education at Indiana University – Bloomington. **Haoai Zhao** is a Doctoral Student in the Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Studies at Indiana University. **Lynn M. Jamieson** is a Professor Emerita at Indiana University – Bloomington. Please send all correspondence to Kevin Naaman, knaaman@indiana.edu

CONCLUSIONS
The authors encourage STOs to ensure that tourists have the necessary information to engage in various recreational pursuits while traveling as a conventioneer. This study has important implications for STOs because tourists are known to generate substantial economic activity, and the quality of TCM information may give some STOs a competitive edge.

Introduction

In America, a surge of newly created convention centers has been seen in the last half-century (Boo & Kim, 2019). There are over 430 convention centers in America, and the competition for convention venues is still increasing (International Association of Venue Managers [IAVM], 2017). Research concerning convention bureaus and centers has been recently defined as its own research paradigm in tourism (Bowen, Fidgeon, & Page, 2014; Pike & Page, 2014). Studies related to economic impacts, operations, and performance evaluations are some of the commonly researched topics in this paradigm (Boo & Kim, 2010; Boo & Kim, 2019; Braun, 1992; Kim, Chon, & Chung, 2003).

However, despite the expansion of convention sites and the growing research interests in convention bureau operations, there is a need to analyze the information that convention bureaus disseminate to prospective conventioneers (Lee, Close, & Love, 2010; Masberg, 2000; Reinhold, Laesser, & Beritelli, 2015; Wang, 2008; Yoo & Weber, 2005). Information routinely comes in the form of tourism collateral materials (TCMs), which are disseminated by state tourism offices (STOs). For clarity, STOs refer to state-level convention bureaus, which are also sometimes referred to as destination marketing organizations (DMOs) in the wider body of literature. STOs still spend a large portion of their budgets printing TCMs such as magazine excerpts and brochures (Kim, Jang, & Morrison, 2011). Analyzing the information presented in TCMs is important to research, because the quality of this information can give some STOs an economic advantage over others (Lee et al., 2010; Pike & Page, 2014; Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014)

To date, there has been some research on TCMs with respect to electronic platforms (Li, Robinson, & Oriade, 2017; Marasco, Buonincontri, van Niekerk, Orlowski, & Okumus, 2018), but the focus of this study was interested in traditional, printed TCMs, which are still widely used (Kim et al., 2011). Additionally, the lack of research on the nature of TCM information is problematic for STOs seeking information on how to improve their operations and adapt to current marketing trends. For instance, globalization has made the convention bureau businesses more economically competitive, necessitating convention bureaus to change their marketing tactics to reach larger audiences (Jetter & Chen, 2009; Soteriades, 2012; Tsiotsou & Ratten, 2010).

Therefore, the purpose of this research was to conduct an exploratory study concerning the information presented in the fifty state-level convention bureaus' (STOs) TCMs. The researchers were primarily interested in exploring two questions.

Q1: What kind of tourist activities are marketed to conventioneers?

Q2: Do the TCMs provide conventioneers enough information (i.e., transportation, cost, safety tips, etc.) to partake in the marketed tourist activities near the convention site?

These are important questions to explore, because conventioneers do not typically stay within the confines of the convention center but oftentimes seek to partake in the tourist experiences marketed in the TCMs.

For example, convention planners consider the quality and capacity of the site, the affordability, the variety of restaurants, the accessibility of the destination, the climate, the city's reputation, the variety of local attractions, and the quality of service provided by the convention site (Baloglu & Love, 2005). Selection of a convention site is therefore not only determined by the quality of the venue but also by the availability and diversity of the host city's local attractions (Chen, 2006; Crouch & Louviere, 2004; Grouch, Chiappa, & Perdue, 2019; Mair & Thompson, 2009; Ying, 2017). The implication from this study is that the authors explore the usage of TCMs—in the context of convention planning—and their potential to draw more attendees.

Methods

The purpose of this research was to explore the contents of state tourism offices' tourism collateral materials (STOs TCMs). Content analysis was the chosen analytical tool, because it can generate data to help provide insight into understudied phenomena (Choi, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007; Jurowski & Olsen, 1995; Stepchenkova, Kirilenko, & Morrison, 2008). Stepchenkova et al. (2008) referred to content analysis as one of tourism's common methodologies used to study research topics since the 1970s. Destination image formation and marketing effectiveness are two examples of how content analysis has been applied in tourism studies (Jetter & Chen, 2009; Lin, Pearson, & Cai, 2011; Molina, Gómez, & Martín-Consuegra, 2010; Pike & Page, 2014; Stepchenkova et al., 2008). For these reasons, the researchers deemed content analysis of the STO's TCMs (e.g., magazines and brochures) an appropriate data analytic tool for this exploratory study.

Materials and Procedure

The selected sample included all STOs that sent TCMs to prospective groups through meeting planners. In 2008, requests for the materials were made to the

STOs by using their "800" number, thus replicating what a meeting organizer would do when seeking information about prospective convention sites. The researcher requesting the TCMs did not disclose their identity as a researcher. This was done so that the STOs were not influenced to potentially send different TCMs from their typical clients.

Those responding to the request were not told about the study but asked, "I would like to request information about 'Utah' tourism to assist my group in making a decision as to whether to hold our convention in your state." Materials were requested and sent to the study address in the researchers' business office. Magazine excerpts and brochures were the only types of documents received. This included magazine sections or brochures with: (1) photographs of sites or attractions and (2) text describing marketed tourist activities (i.e., scuba diving, site-seeing). The materials were received and recorded as to what was contained in each state packet, filed by state and stored for further analysis. All but four states responded and sent data to the researchers, leaving a total response of 46 out of 50 states (92.0%).

Data Analysis

Coding of the information was conducted through a three-pass manual coding system that identified key passages in the literature that pertained to natural attractions, mapping, directions, advice, and other key information. The data were analyzed using open coding to locate major themes, axial coding to identify key linked themes, and selective coding to elicit key findings in the literature. Each of the coded passages was digitized and analyzed through NVivo11 to gain an objective view of key themes and items that may not have been labeled correctly. In the manual coding analysis, the scope and role of the tourism information was noted. The contents were analyzed through the systematic coding process to qualitatively generate key themes from the STO's TCMs. Two research team members participated in the coding process to corroborate findings.

Results

Three major themes were identified after conducting the content analysis of the brochures and magazine excerpts (i.e., TCMs). These themes included: (1) local attractions, (2) culture, and (3) outdoor pursuits. We discovered there were inconsistent—and in some cases very detailed—pieces of information to help ensure the conventioneers could pursue a tourist activity with minimal planning. The following types of information were provided in some of the successful TCMs: (1) location, (2) level of skill needed to partake in the activity (i.e., beginner hiking trail, advanced rock climbing), (3) contact information,

(4) safety tips (i.e., wear sun screen while outdoors), and (5) transportation suggestions. These are some of the criteria the researchers used to identify "informative TCMs." Conversely, "vague TCMs" typically did not provide much more information aside from the location of the tourist activity. The remainder of this section explores the key themes from the STOs and their TCMs with respect to their level of guidance.

LOCAL ATTRACTIONS

This theme represented any tourist activity with a pull factor. This term refers to the aspects that make a destination enticing for tourists (Popp, 2013). This could include beaches, museums, monuments, national parks, and other local natural and cultural tourism activities. Here is an excerpt that demonstrates such an attraction with a substantial amount of information:

> "*VISITOR ETIQUETTE IN ARIZONA'S INDIAN COUNTRY: While each tribal community has specific regulations, the following guidelines will help you enjoy your visit to Arizona's Native American lands while honoring the people, lands and culture . . . Don't speak during dances or applaud afterward. Do not disturb or remove any items and/or artifacts in any reservation. You may be subject to federal and tribal prosecution.*" (Arizona Office of Tourism [AOT], 2010, p.32)

This depiction of formal etiquette displays the importance of providing prospective conventioneers guidance concerning tourist activities. Had this information not been presented, future tourists may have acted culturally insensitive. With the type of information included in this TCM, we believe there was substantial information to ensure the welfare of both the integrity of the Indian people and the conventioneers. For this reason, we deemed the TCMs from this STO as informative. Conversely, here is an example of an excerpt that provided very little information about their local attractions:

> "*the best environment for their events*" (Glorieta, A Lifeway Conference Center, n.d., p. 1).

Overall, this brochure's text was sparse and had less than one page of content. This quote highlights a lack of direction in guiding conventioneers to take part in the attractions being marketed. This may be problematic since the environment is presumably of a substantial quality, but there was no substantive information to guide conventioneers on how to utilize the environment safely and appropriately. This TCM was therefore classified as vague.

CULTURE

This theme was created to highlight activities and attractions that involved historical assets, heritage sites, festivals/events, and tours (e.g. wine, bourbon tours). The rationale for this theme's creation was due to the many culturally related activities promoted by the STOs. Some of the STOs introduced unique

attractions and amenities to satisfy the diverse needs of conventioneers. Historic sites not only offered educational experiences to the tourists but also encouraged close contact to the natural sites; for instance:

> "Located north of Jackson … the existence of this Petrified Forest has been known since the middle 1800's, but only within the past three decades has it been developed and opened for the public. Expert research during this time has brought forth a wealth of facts and features about the forest. The many points of interest are viewed from an easy walking nature trail about 6 blocks long. A printed trail guide explains each feature and point of interest" (Jackson Mississippi CVB, 2000, p.17).

This TCM provided guidance for conventioneers regarding the historical attributes of the site; however, little information was provided regarding the type of hike tourists should expect. If the site were in a rural, dense forest, then the tourists might encounter ticks and other nuisance wildlife. This context is warranted to make sure tourists take the necessary precautions to protect their health by taking precautionary steps such as wearing appropriate clothing.

In some cases, STOs informed conventioneers how to use the TCM, which subsequently increased the level of guidance for the marketed activities.

> "All you need to plan an amazing Alaska trip is in your hands. Inside you'll find: Maps-Color-coded maps to help you identify different regions and destinations. Planning Information–Travel tips and sample itineraries to show you how to make the most of your time. Sample Itineraries—Get ideas of some of the things you can see and do in just one week in Alaska. Regions—Unique history, culture, and communities in each region of the state" (Alaska Travel Industry Association [AITA], 2010, p.1).

This TCM provided important information regarding convention and tourism planning, so we identified this TCM as a great example for future STOs to model after.

Outdoor Pursuits

Any tourist activity that promoted outdoor activities, services, and recreation venues were included in this theme. Examples included and are not limited to outdoor adventure activities, trail hiking, animal watching, camping, fishing, hunting, and water sports. Here is an example excerpt of this theme:

> "Twelve state parks provide … ocean swimming to wilderness hiking to cross-country skiing … Rules at Maine's State Parks are simple and intended to protect the site and enhance everyone's enjoyment. Pets are not allowed on beaches or at Sebago Lake State Park … many people continue to enjoy the areas on foot during the fall and winter and are encourage to do so" (Maine Tourism Association, 2001).

Although the STO marketed various outdoor pursuits, there was minimal guidance to ensure novice recreationists were adequately prepared to enter these parks. No follow-up information was provided after the park rules were

described; and no contact information or other forms of information were given to help visitors prepare for the outdoor pursuits.

> "FISHING—Rivers, estuaries, lakes and coastlines make Oregon an angler's paradise. Fly-fishermen chase steelhead in Oregano rivers. Delicious halibut and albacore tuna are hooked in summer, and so are lingcod and rockfish. Fall chinook and coho salmon swim into bays along the Coast to head upriver. For information on fishing seasons, locations, limits, and licenses, visit www.DFW.State.or.us" (Oregon Tourism Commission, 2014, p.18).

This sort of information provided substantial guidance for conventioneers. The seasonality of the fish, type of fishing waters, and the external online link gave conventioneers the ability to attain the legal fishing license needed.

These excerpts provided a few specific examples where STOs provided various levels of information with their TCMs. The researchers were not interested in ranking how informative the STOs were in relation to one another. However, once the researchers became familiar with the data, it became apparent that some of the TCMs did not provide much information so that meeting planners could easily partake in the marketed tourist activities. The researchers classified these varying levels of guidance using descriptions such as "informative" and "vague" so that the readers could get some sense of the quality of the TCMs.

Discussion

This study explored the types of tourist activities that are routinely marketed to conventioneers using state tourism offices' tourism collateral materials (STOs TCMs). After reviewing all the documents, the researchers recommended that STOs provide more detailed, informative guidance to prospective conventioneers. For conventioneers, the lack of suitable information is compounded due to the sheer numbers in attendance at a chosen venue.

However, information of the convention destination is a crucial factor for convention participation decision-making. Many studies have argued that the location and attractiveness of a convention venue influences the decision to attend a conference (Oppermann, 1998; Jago & Deery, 2005; Zhang, Leung, & Qu, 2007; Mair & Thompson, 2009; Yoo & Zhao, 2010). Many convention bureau officers noticed that the attractiveness of leisure activities influences convention attendance and economic activity. Take for instance one last excerpt:

> "Within minutes after leaving a meeting session, attendees can be sailoring or fishing on the lake, kayaking along some pristine river, or skiing down the world-famous slopes of resorts like Stowe" (Successful Meetings, 2002, p. 9).

This excerpt highlights that convention locations are important, because they may coincide with leisure and enrichment opportunities for the conventioneers. Many states can offer enticing attractions and activities for a variety of

conventioneers such as this STO. However, not all STOs market the attractions and activities with the same level of guidance, which may put some STOs at a disproportionate marketing advantage.

Also, it is important to note that conventions typically draw large numbers of people on business trips. An interesting phenomenon is that business travelers generate a substantial portion of economic activity near the convention sites (Grant & Weber, 1996; Oppermann, 1995; Weber & Chon, 2002). This is because the business travelers may stay longer and engage in local leisure activities (Weber & Chon, 2002). So, providing detailed, informative guidance to the potential conventioneers is important to ensure the long-lasting sustainability of the sites' attractions, activities, and economy. Though, the increased economic activity may come at a cost, because a large number of convention attendees can erode natural resources (Cadarso, Gómez, López, & Tobarra, 2016). To compensate for this possibility, we suggest that STOs provide detailed information in their TCMs to help with a convention sites sustainability (both economically and environmentally). We suggest that TCMs be more thorough with mapping, regulatory instructions, and adequate planning information in order to create a satisfying experience for both tourists and residents who interact with meeting groups.

Limitations

According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), one limitation from analyzing documents is that they may provide incomplete information. We were also missing TCMs from four out of the fifty STOs across the U.S. Another limitation from this study is that we only had two individuals conduct the thematic coding.

Future Directions

The point of this preliminary study was to identify the various types of tourism opportunities offered through STOs. The next step suggested for researchers is to include a systematic way of evaluating how well STOs TCMs prepare individuals to engage in tourism while attending a convention. Future research should also investigate additional criteria and attempt to validate and reliably assess which criteria of guidance are needed for tourism activities. Lastly, future research could assess whether there are economic and marketing differences between the traditionally printed TCMs versus electronic platforms. Our study provides a framework from which future studies can start.

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