

Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Charice Hayes

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Walden University
2016

Abstract

Marketing Strategies of Small Traditional Travel Agencies in a Technology-Driven

World

by

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MS, Kaplan University, 2010

BA, Morgan State University, 1998

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

December 2016

Abstract

In 2012, there was a 70% increase in online travel booking, resulting in small traditional brick-and-mortar travel agencies having serious difficulties with obtaining and retaining customers. The purpose of this case study was to explore online marketing strategies that leaders of small traditional travel agencies have used to successfully obtain and retain customers. Technology disruption theory was the conceptual framework of this study. Using criterion sampling, the population for this study consisted of 3 leaders of small traditional travel agencies located in the state of Maryland. Data collection consisted of interviews, observations, and review of documentation, such as displays, websites, business cards, and email campaigns. Data were analyzed using methodological triangulation through inductive coding of phrases and words. The following 4 themes emerged: company threats, online marketing strategies, various marketing strategies for improvement, and ways to compete with Internet-based travel agencies. Results indicated that 66% of participants believed that Internet-based travel agencies were threats. All of the participants used a form of online marketing and believed that customer loyalty helped to compete with Internet-based travel agencies. Positive social change may result when leaders of small traditional travel agencies increase their knowledge of online marketing strategies to obtain and retain customers, thereby leading to greater access to online travel opportunities for all, including physically challenged individuals often confined to their living areas.

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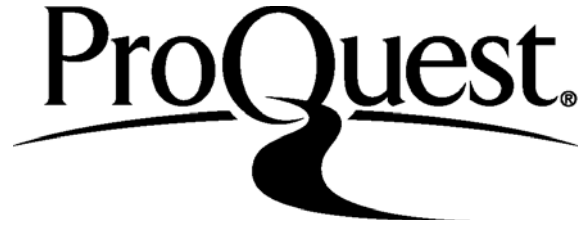
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Dedication

I dedicate this study to those who had an instrumental hand with the progress and completion of this study. I would also like to dedicate this study to the memory of my nephew, Jeffrey Alan Matthews, Jr. Many thanks to my family and friends who have seen me work endlessly until I achieved this milestone. Thank you.

Acknowledgments

I would not have made it through this process without the grace of God. I would like to give thanks to God for giving me the strength to make it through this process. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Jorge Gaytan, Dr. Erik Shefsky, and Dr. Alen Badal, for their professional guidance.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Prasad, Tata, and Guo (2012) found that small businesses have limited resources and limited access towards implementing technologies. Because of this confined access, small businesses' marketing performance needs improvement to attract customers (Prasad et al., 2012). Kiran, Majumdar, and Kishore (2012) reported that limited resources and the lack of marketing expertise and practice could hinder small business success. There is an abundance of literature related to business marketing conducted by individuals working in various types of small businesses. However, a lack of literature exists that focuses on the use of marketing strategies in small traditional travel agencies (Abou-Shouk, Lim, & Megicks, 2013). Additional studies need to focus on the marketing distribution channels used by travel agencies because marketing channels are diverse, have a high risk, and have significantly different capabilities (Huang, Chen, & Wu 2009; Huang, Yung, & Yang 2011).

Researchers need to identify measurements that can provide effective marketing strategy information to travel agency leaders (Kim, 2013). Small traditional travel agencies' performance is slow partially because they have not taken advantage of technological innovations (Abou-Shouk et al., 2013) or marketing mix, which is a set of tools businesses apply to accomplish marketing goals (Charoensettasilp & Wu, 2013). While several studies have been conducted that address the marketing mix (Hossain, Aimin, & Begum, 2012; Katsoni & Venetsanopoulou, 2012), these studies failed to demonstrate which marketing methods, including Internet-based, are successful at obtaining and retaining customers for profit maximization.

Background of the Problem

The term *small business* often refers to the growing economy and job creation in the United States (Allen, Ericksen, & Collins, 2013; Ngozi, 2012). Small businesses constitute over 98% of all companies in the United States (Ngozi, 2012) and are responsible for 65% of net job creation in the United States (Allen et al., 2013). Despite the influence small businesses have on the U.S. economy, they have limited resources, and some of their leaders are often not experts in the marketing field (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012). Marketing is an effort to gain customers or consumers (Grönroos & Gummerus, 2014). Small business leaders are willing to adopt customer relationship management to retain customers, build long-lasting relationships, and grow customer value (Bahrami, Ghorbani, & Arabzad, 2012). As a result, effective marketing strategies are crucial to obtaining and retaining customers. The travel agency is a sector with high business mortality (Bagur-Femenías, Perramon, & Amat, 2015). The Internet has improved the efficiency of marketing efforts to customers in travel booking, thus reducing the role of traditional travel agencies (Del Chiappa, 2013).

Owners of small traditional travel agencies are concerned that potential consumers are gravitating towards booking travel on the Internet (Lawton & Weaver, 2009). Huang et al. (2009) stated that, based on several studies, there was no empirical or theoretical studies for the best marketing distribution mix for travel agencies. To address this gap in the literature, the focus of this study was to explore marketing strategies leaders of small traditional travel agencies have used to successfully obtain and retain customers.

Problem Statement

Since a significant number of customers have switched to online travel booking, small traditional travel agency leaders are having serious difficulties obtaining and retaining customers (Kuo, Chang, Cheng, & Lai, 2012). In 2012, 70% of individuals used the Internet to book travel in the United States (Peng, Xu, & Chen, 2013). This trend has resulted in a steady decline in booking through small traditional travel agencies year after year (Yang, Flynn, & Anderson, 2014). The general business problem is that some leaders of small traditional travel agencies are unable to maximize profits because many customers are booking online outside of small traditional travel agencies. The specific business problem is that some leaders of small traditional travel agencies lack online marketing strategies used to successfully obtain and retain customers.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this multicase qualitative case study was to explore the online marketing strategies leaders of small traditional travel agencies have used to successfully obtain and retain customers. The specific population of this study consisted of three small traditional travel agency leaders, located in the state of Maryland, who had successfully used marketing strategies to attain and retain customers. This study's findings may impact social change by helping other leaders of small traditional travel agencies better position themselves to improve performance and to provide local employment and employee spending.

Nature of the Study

I used a qualitative research methodology in this study. A qualitative research methodology was suitable for this study because qualitative research focuses on the rich description and the significance of phenomena based on perspectives of individuals under investigation (Ramlo & Berit, 2013). A qualitative methodology is most appropriately used when there is a need for sufficient understanding and importance in knowing the *why* behind a problem (Wolgemuth et al., 2015). In this study, the business problem was that small traditional travel agency leaders lack marketing strategies to successfully obtain and retain customers. A quantitative methodology was not suitable for this exploration because there were no hypotheses to test in this study (Venkatesh, Brown, & Bala, 2013). The mixed-methods methodology was not appropriate because I was not gathering evidence based on the nature of theoretical orientation (Klassen, Creswell, Clark, Smith, & Meissner, 2012). Therefore, a qualitative research method was more suitable for this study.

A case study research design approach is appropriate when the goal of researchers is to understand a problem in-depth and comprehensively within its real-life context (Wahyuni, 2012; Yin, 2014). A case study provides the researcher with a framework to conduct observations and analysis of participants' views (Klonoski, 2013). Because I sought to understand the phenomenon of the successful use of online marketing strategies by small traditional travel agencies in-depth and comprehensively within its real-life context, the case study research design was the most suitable research design for this study.

Other designs, such as phenomenological, ethnography, and narrative were not suitable for this study. In a phenomenological design, a researcher's primary goal is to access the subjectivity of participants (Englander, 2012) and, consequently, it was not an appropriate design approach for my study. I did not select an ethnography because it involves researchers immersing themselves into the culture studied to understand the day-to-day lives of individuals from that culture (Cruz & Higginbottom, 2013; Sangasubana, 2011). The narrative design approach favors a unified, coherent, continuous concept of identity (Deppermann, 2013). The narrative design approach was not the focus of my study.

Research Question

The research question is key in investigation (Peters, Adam, Alonge, Agyepong, & Tran, 2014). When researchers begin to conduct research, the research question is the starting point to inquiry (Peters et al., 2014). The overarching research question for this study was as follows: What online marketing strategies do leaders of small traditional travel agencies use to obtain and retain customers?

Interview Questions

To gain a better understanding of this problem, I asked the participants to answer the following questions:

1. What threats have you experienced as an owner of a small traditional travel agency?
2. What Internet strategies have you implemented at your travel agency?

3. Have Internet strategies been successful in attaining and retaining customers?
If so or not, please explain.
4. How do you compete with Internet-only travel agencies?
5. What online marketing strategies have you used in your travel agency to reach customers? Please explain if they have been successful.
6. What online marketing strategies do you use in your travel agency to retain customers?
7. What online marketing strategies have you found effective?
8. What online marketing strategies have you tried that turned out to be noneffective?
9. How have you addressed online travel in your strategy to market to customers?
10. What strategies have you used to improve marketing within your travel agency?
11. What additional information would you like to add regarding online marketing strategies that leaders of small traditional travel agencies could use to attain and retain customers?

The answers to these questions generated information related to the experiences of business leaders about the marketing aspects of their travel agencies that have allowed them to obtain and retain customers. Potential themes emerged from these experiences. Because themes in the literature are the scopes for developing interview questions, I identified topics for these specific interview questions from the literature review and

aligned them with the overarching research question, as recommended by other researchers (Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2013). I used a panel of experts to review these questions for rigor and validity, as suggested by several researchers (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014; Magasi et al., 2012).

Conceptual Framework

Technology disruption theory (TDT), also known as the disruptive innovation model, was the conceptual framework for this study. Christensen (1997) developed the TDT in an effort to explain innovations that interrupt the current infrastructure and market structure of an industry (Giglierano, Vitale, & McClatchy, 2011). The Internet and other emerging technologies are examples of disruptive innovation (Giglierano et al., 2011). Christensen's TDT is a specific type of strategic innovation that is different from the traditional way, such as Internet banking and low-cost airlines (Charitou & Markides, 2012).

Disruptive innovations begin with small and low-margin businesses and develop to capture a large share of the established market (Charitou & Markides, 2012). Key concepts vital to this theory are that existing suppliers embrace an e-value system that limits their ability to introduce disruptive technologies, products, and business models (Giglierano et al., 2011). This theory aligned with this study because exploring online marketing strategies that leaders of small traditional travel agencies have used may lead to obtaining and retaining more customers. Christensen's theory also helped describe the marketing concepts.

Operational Definitions

The focus of the study was to explore the marketing strategies leaders of small traditional travel agencies have used to obtain and retain customers successfully. For the purposes of this study, I defined the following terms as:

Distribution channels: Distribution channels are the routes through which organizations connect and sell products and services (Huang et al., 2009).

Marketing mix: The marketing mix is a tool businesses apply to accomplish marketing goals to target groups (Charoensettasilp & Wu, 2013).

Traditional travel agency: This refers to a travel agency with a developed network of branch offices for office visits (Elhaj, 2012; Holjevac & Basan, 2009).

Traditional travel agent: A person in the travel distribution system that forms an important link between providers and consumers (Purna, Tat, Rasli, Chin, & Sukati, 2012).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

This subsection includes a discussion of the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of this study. Assumptions are what researchers presume to be true about their research (Kirkwood & Price, 2013). Limitations are potential weaknesses beyond the researcher's control (Lees et al., 2012). Delimitations are design constraints that the researcher controls, such as the study site location (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Assumptions

I made several assumptions in this study. The primary assumption was that participants would be truthful with their responses. Another was that business owners and

marketing managers provide marketing value to the organization. The last assumption I made was that the information from interviews, participant observations, and document review would reflect the participants' perspectives on their marketing strategies.

Limitations

This study has limitations that need to be recognized. The specific population of this study consisted of leaders of small traditional travel agencies, located in the state of Maryland, who had successfully implemented marketing strategies to attain and retain customers. I gathered data by conducting in-depth interviews, participant observations, and document review. The sample was not a generalization of all U.S. small traditional travel agencies. However, the sample could represent transferability for other traditional travel agencies (Wahyuni, 2012).

Delimitations

One delimitation of this study was that it focused on several small businesses in a specific demographic area. A specific demographic area limits the ability to create transferability from one group to another (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). The population consisted of three leaders of small traditional travel agencies located in the state of Maryland.

Significance of the Study

Some leaders of small traditional travel agencies may lack marketing strategies to obtain and retain customers successfully in an innovative technological world. This significance of this study is that the study's results may assist leaders of small traditional travel agencies to obtain and retain more customers by entering the Internet market. A

study conducted by Huang et al. (2009) indicated that there is a lack of research on the development of the optimal marketing distribution mix for the travel agency industry. There were only a few articles published that analyzed the competence of small traditional travel agencies (Fuentes, 2011). Filling in these gaps in the literature may provide an understanding of the best marketing strategies among small traditional travel agencies that can help improve business performance and revenue. Christensen's (1997) TDT provided a framework to help address these gaps. Technological innovation has an effect on small traditional travel agencies' customer attainment, business revenue, and employees (e.g., travel agents; Abou-Shouk, Lim, Megicks, 2013; Del Chiappa, 2013).

I sought a positive social change that may allow leaders of small traditional travel agencies to improve performance and provide local employment and employee spending. Small businesses are an essential part of the economy in which they provide jobs (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012). With the findings of this study, small traditional travel agency leaders may be able to obtain and retain more customers, increase revenues, improve overall business performance, and avoid financial failure.

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

Lambert and Lambert (2013) provided six motives for conducting a literature review, including to (a) define recent knowledge to guide professional practice; (b) write a research proposal; (c) describe research and development methods; (d) name experts in a field of practice, education, or research; (e) describe funding sources; and (f) satisfy intellectual interests. In the following literature review, I located and reviewed scholarly articles from various business research databases correlated with the central research

question: What marketing strategies do leaders of small traditional travel agencies use to obtain and retain customers? Additionally, I compiled literature with a focus on various aspects related to the research question and conceptual framework, including the concepts of small business, disruptive innovation, small business marketing, marketing mix, traditional travel agencies, traditional travel agencies' marketing, and distribution channels. The review of literature in this study relates to the business problem included in the Problem Statement subsection of this study.

In this literature review, I will explore and explain past and current knowledge of small businesses, marketing, and traditional travel agencies. Peer-reviewed journal articles, articles from professional publications, and dissertations from Walden University's business management databases were sources I used to write this literature review. Some of the sources I used include the *International Journal of Tourism Research*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Small Business Management*, *Tourism & Hospitality Management*, and *Journal of Travel Research*. The keywords I used during my search of the literature were: *small business*, *marketing strategies for customer satisfaction*, *marketing strategies for small businesses*, *marketing mix*, *travel agency marketing*, *traditional travel agencies*, *market-driven*, and *travel agency marketing channels*. From these keywords, I developed common themes that helped me organize the literature review.

In all, I used 107 sources in this study with 89 being peer-reviewed articles and published within the past 5 years. In percentage terms, 86% of the total sources in the literature review were peer-reviewed and published within 5 years. The research

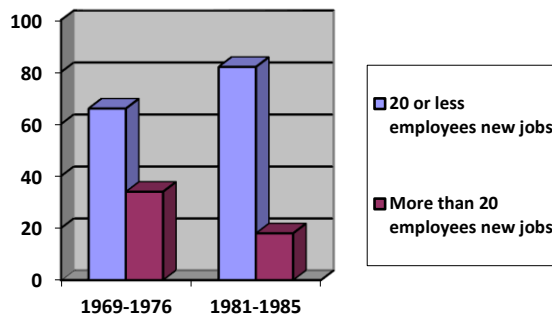
question, along with the literature review, was critical in building the foundation for this study.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore marketing strategies that leaders of small traditional travel agencies have used to obtain and retain customers successfully. Small businesses need information on how to market products and services, which can be a barrier because of time and financial resource constraints (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012). The travel industry is highly competitive (Ivars, Sánchez, & Rebollo, 2013) and the digital age of communications resulted in a remarkable phenomenon in marketing (Xu, Duan, & Whinston, 2014). Therefore, leaders of small traditional travel agencies should have command of marketing strategies to increase revenue.

Previous scholars have investigated the performance of travel agencies (Butnaru & Bordeianu, 2012; Ching-Chiao & Ching-Fu, 2012; Huang, 2013; Kim, 2013), distribution channels for travel agencies (Katsoni & Venetsanopoulou, 2012; Purna, Tat, Rasli, Chin, & Sukati, 2012), crisis management in the travel agency (Paraskevas & Altinay, 2013), and service quality in the tourism industry (Kuo et al., 2012; Lai, 2014). However, Huang et al. (2009) stated that, based on several studies, no empirical or theoretical studies had been conducted that recommends the best marketing distribution mix for travel agencies. This study differs from other studies because there was an in-depth evaluation of the marketing strategies used by leaders of small traditional travel agencies to attain and retain customers successfully in an innovative world. I attempted to answer the overarching research question using the lens of Christensen's (1997) TDT.

Concept of Small Business

Many researchers, from the 1960s to as recently as 2015, have conducted studies on the nature and growth of small businesses (Cole, 2013; Haltiwanger, Jarmin, & Miranda, 2013; Prasad et al., 2012). Most of these researchers made the claim that small businesses are the backbone of the U.S. economy and are essential to the U.S. economy (Cole, 2013; Haltiwanger, Jarmin, & Miranda, 2013; Prasad et al., 2012). Small businesses constitute a source of major employment and handle significant revenue-taxing bodies, which makes them key contributors to the U.S. economy (Prasad et al., 2012). Small businesses' health is vital to economic growth because of the production and creation of jobs as small businesses are the drivers of and most important foundation for job creation in the United States (Cole, 2013; Neumark, 2013; Neumark, Wall, & Zhang, 2011; Weinzimmer & Nystrom, 2015). For example, as shown in Figure 1, between 1969 and 1976, firms with 20 or fewer employees created 66% of all net new jobs in the United States, and during 1981–1985, those firms accounted for 82% of employment growth (Neumark et al., 2011).



*Figure 1. Small business job growth. Adapted from “Do Small Businesses Create More Jobs? New Evidence for the United States from the National Establishment Time Series,” by D. Neumark, B. Wall, and J. Zhang, 2011, *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 1, p. 36.*

The favorable perception that small businesses create most jobs in the United States depends on the firms’ size and age (Haltiwanger et al., 2013; Hulbert, Gilmore, & Carson, 2013). From the results of previous studies, it was shown that there is a positive relationship between new firm formation and subsequent employment growth (Ouimet & Zarutskie, 2014). Haltiwanger et al. (2013) concluded that startups are small; therefore, the popular perception that small businesses are the leaders in job creation flourished by the contribution of startups to net growth. The significance of the contributions of small businesses to production and employment makes small businesses the basis for economic growth (Cole, 2013). With increased job creation, small businesses help stimulate the U.S. economy, as they produce half of the private gross domestic product (GDP) in the United States (Cole, 2013). This growth has brought some barriers along with it that small businesses must face.

While small businesses create jobs in communities, they face significant challenges led by the lack of resources available. For example, Greene, Brush, and

Brown (2015) and Lin et al. (2011) argued that limited resources and size are detrimental to small businesses. Because small businesses have limited resources, they become financially vulnerable organizations (Prasad et al., 2012). Lin et al. (2011) found that those challenges are parallel to labor, successful information technology (IT), and sources of capital. Out of these difficulties, Lin et al. attempted to link small business challenges to developing and implementing IT. Lin et al. found that small business leaders have to secure IT success and integrate IT into their organization. In addition, because small businesses suffered the impact of the recession, they reacted by cutting costs, including those for labor (Cole, 2013). The lack of access to capital markets also had an adverse impact on small businesses (Cole, 2013).

Other adversities have affected small businesses as well. For instance, small businesses in the United States became overwhelmed with expensive equipment, poor policy practice, inconsistent policies, lack of entrepreneurial spirit, organizational barriers, and insufficient training and development for staff (Ngozi, 2012). Insufficient access to international markets and development, due to insufficient capital and the lack of strategic and financial planning, afflicted these businesses (Ngozi, 2012). Hulbert et al. (2013), Ouimet and Zarutskie (2014), and Wright and Stigliani (2013) posited that small businesses who were not growing lack (a) opportunistic perceptions of the external environment, (b) the skillful ambition of the owner/managers to increase as a business, (c) a business philosophy of innovation and flexibility; and (d) the use of extensive private corporate networks. These four characteristics that nongrowing small businesses lack are debilitating issues for them (Cole, 2013; Lin et al., 2011; Ngozi, 2012; Wright &

Stigliani, 2013) that prevent growth, profit, and innovation, which are crucial to the financial success of any small business (Greene, Brush, & Brown, 2015).

Disruptive Innovation

In 1997, Christensen developed the TDT, and this theory is important because of its impact on the substructure of a business (Gigliano et al., 2011). TDT outlines a process through which a disruptive product transforms a market (Guttentag, 2015). Christensen developed this theory and business model while studying innovation and adoption patterns in software industries, such as accounting, the disk drive, excavator, and sheet steel (Gigliano et al., 2011). When established businesses face disruptive innovations, these firms almost always fail to adapt and are often forced out of business (Lewis, 2012). Disruptive innovations introduce a new value proposition that either restructure existing markets or create new ones (Sultan & van de Bunt-Kokhuis, 2012).

Christensen's disruption innovation comes in two forms. According to Sultan and van de Bunt-Kokhuis (2012), the two types of disruptive innovations include low-end and new-market. Low-end disruptive innovations occur when businesses offer *good-enough* products and services to satisfy customers with lower prices (Sultan & van de Bunt-Kokhuis, 2012). New-market disruptive innovations happen when characteristics of existing goods and services limit the number of potential customers or force consumption to take place in locations that are inconvenient or centralized to existing customers (Sultan & van de Bunt-Kokhuis, 2012). An important part of this constraint comes when customers are invested in a company's existing business model and adoption would

represent a disruption (Gigliano et al., 2011). Marketing allows business leaders to observe customers and focus on their need situations (Gigliano et al., 2011).

Marketing Strategies of Small Businesses

Marketing is an evolution of change and has to be customer oriented (Morgan, 2012). The need to link marketing with business performance has become more urgent and, over the years, the conceptual understanding of the role of marketing allows businesses to create and sustain a competitive advantage (Morgan, 2012). When it comes to marketing, the customer has a central role in shaping the success of a business (Bahrami, Ghorbani, & Arabzad, 2012; Osborne & Ballantyne, 2012). The Internet and other technology have revolutionized the way businesses and customers interact (Abou-Shouk et al., 2013). This dynamic interaction, along with the rapid growth in the number of online users, the increasing rate of online transactions, and the fast progress in IT, should provide businesses with more capabilities and a competitive advantage (Bahrami et al., 2012).

However, Hulbert et al. (2013) suggested that traditional marketing methods that are logical, efficient, and require large budgets should be adapted to fit small businesses that depend on the expertise of the owner-manager with a small operating budget. Hulbert et al. also discussed *entrepreneurial marketing*, a theory about producing something new that did not otherwise exist. Entrepreneurial marketing opportunities can range from identifying the need for important changes in the combination of products or services to carrying out additional changes to existing products and services (Hulbert et al., 2013). Marketing strategies are essential to the success of recently launched or existing products

(Chan, Ip, & Cho, 2010). Managers use their market knowledge to reveal current capability insufficiencies in the organization and the emerging market opportunities that may be critical in the development of new capabilities in customer attainment (Atuahene-Gima, 2005).

Marketing focuses on customer management along with persuading customers to purchase products or services, this purchase indicates that clients are satisfied with a product or service (Bašan, Dlačić, & Trezner, 2013). In a case study, Chan et al. (2010) argued that the ultimate goal of a business is to create and deliver value to its customers. These authors proposed a *system dynamics model* that helps in understanding the elements of marketing along with product development to examine the impact that (a) advertising, (b) marketing, (c) product appeal, and (d) customer experience have on purchasing behavior and the profits made by a business. The results of this study showed that businesses have to place more emphasis on customer attainment and retention primarily through marketing functions and product development (Chan et. al, 2010). Among these marketing functions, Dolnicar and Ring (2014) focused on the market, brand, market segmentation, competition, and positioning. Dolnicar and Ring found that travel marketing research mainly focused on the decision of service promises and generated frameworks to improve executive decision making.

In terms of a marketing strategy and a marketing performance measurement system (MSMP), Lamberti and Noci (2010) focused on different marketing strategic groups by dividing seven companies into three groups. The groups included transactional marketing companies (TMCs), relational marketing companies (RMCs), and

transactional/relational marketing companies (TRCs). TMCs' main focus is to attract customers, as opposed to establishing long-term relationships with them (Grönroos, 2011; Lamberti & Noci, 2010; Shaalan, Reast, Johnson, & Tourky, 2013). RMCs are more relationship oriented, and their focus is on establishing long-term relationships with customers (Lamberti & Noci, 2010). Companies that practice relationship marketing (RM) establish a trust bond with their clients (Lamberti & Noci, 2010). TRCs incorporate the existence of relationship and transaction approaches to customer and supply chain exchanges (Lamberti & Noci, 2010). Companies that are TMCs, RMCs, or TRCs have a focus on the client; however, which strategy is profitable for the business and its stakeholders is uncertain and situational.

Small businesses with close customer relationships have customer loyalty. For example, Hillebrand, Kemp, and Nijssen (2011) found that firms that are closer to customer can respond more quickly and efficiently to customers' changing needs and wants. In comparison, several researchers (Chao & Spillan, 2013; Taghipoor; 2013) stated that small businesses, with close customer relationships, have higher customer loyalty and levels of customer satisfaction. Moreover, while businesses should focus on existing customers, they should monitor future customers and market developments (Hillebrand et al., 2011), and encourage some market-oriented businesses to act on changes in customers' needs (Eggers, Kraus, Hughes, Laraway, & Snyckerski, 2013). The argument that some scholars make is that being closer to the customer and monitoring the customer's needs and wants are examples of exceptional customer management.

Some limitations exist with close customer relationships. Eggers et al. (2013) found close customer relations could set back a business' essential innovation. Atuahene-Gima (2005) found that customer orientation adversely influences a business' essential innovation. Atuahene-Gima also suggested that previous research could have arrived early and, perhaps, could have resulted in an overly basic view of close customer relationships. These relationships do not bring essential innovation or success to a business that would transfer these relationships into profitability and, perhaps, there is a gap between direct customer relationship and essential innovation.

Christensen's (1997) disruption innovation shows that businesses that are very close to, and dependent on, current customers focus heavily on fulfilling these customers' needs and may fail to catch new trends and technologies (Eggers et al., 2013; Hillebrand et al., 2011). On the contrary, Hanne and Scupola (2011) used a case study and revealed that close customer relationship does not hinder radical innovation. A need for close collaboration with consumers gives rise to some circumstances necessary for innovation, such as creativity and idea generation. However, Christensen's disruption innovation refutes this and states that close customer orientation is a risky strategy that might lead to company failure (Eggers et al., 2013). Even though these researchers have different points of view that come from their research, all of them express that radical innovation is an important factor in marketing and innovation.

Along with customer management and satisfaction, marketing should have innovation. Baker and Sinkula (2009) argued that it is obvious to individuals in the marketing, strategic management, and entrepreneurship areas that innovation success is

vital to maintaining and growing customer and product markets. One of Baker and Sinkula's arguments was that businesses with stronger market orientations should be able to produce higher profit margins. Research findings support that market orientation, along with innovation success, creates profitability. Market orientation enables managers to learn from existing and prospective customers' needs and to act in a tactical way to generate superior customer value (Chao & Spillan, 2013). Furthermore, from a service viewpoint, innovation refers to any recombination of resources that creates new benefits for anyone involved in the business network (Kindström & Kowalkowski, 2014). Marketing and innovative capabilities have an influence on a business' performance and competitive advantage (Lew & Sinkovics, 2013). Businesses need to be more customer centered, especially since technology has advanced to the point that it allows lower cost delivery of information and customer solutions (Hosseini, Nemati, & Sadeghi, 2013). Small business owners have to establish which components are key for promoting products or services.

Furthermore, O'Donnell (2011) answered key elements on how small businesses engage in the marketing of products and services. Activities in which small businesses participate that are successful in marketing outcomes are not essentially marketing activities (O'Donnell, 2011). Many studies have acknowledged this documented fact; however, scholars made little attempts to synthesize this information and present it as a contextualized representation of marketing activities for small businesses. O'Donnell argued that the literature presents these key marketing activities in small firms: (a) planning the marketing aspect, (b) managing limited resources, (c) keeping existing

customers, (d) obtaining new customers, (e) collecting information about customers, (f) gathering information about competitors, (g) managing product offerings, (h) managing price, and (i) managing delivery. O'Donnell interviewed an array of 30 employers from different industries and revealed that the nine marketing activities are the core of small business marketing.

In contrast, Cronin-Gilmore's (2012) used a case study to explore small business owners' use of marketing strategies, reasons for their decisions and relationship to marketing strategies, and the impact that these factors have on their small businesses. Cronin-Gilmore used a purposeful sample of 20 small businesses owners. From their research, five themes emerged. Some of the results were that the owners thought their marketing abilities were lacking or missing and that they did not understand that networking and forming business partnerships and alliances are a form of marketing.

Başan et al. (2013) argued that trends in marketing-efficiency measures continue to shift, meaning that while some methods and metrics are becoming more popular and widely used, others are going out of style. With all of these concepts about marketing, no true research that supports small traditional (i.e., brick and mortar) travel agencies' use of improved and successful marketing strategies to stay competitive. However, the two most important goals of marketing are to attain new customers, by promising and providing superior value, and to retain and grow current customers by delivering a product or service that translates into customer satisfaction (Ekankumo, 2012).

Market-Driven Strategies

Market-driven focuses on the customer's needs. Chen and Evans (2012) defined market-driven as understanding and reacting to customer preferences and behaviors. Brettel, Oswald, and Flatten (2012) suggested that market-driven focuses on current needs and, according to Chen and Evans a business should not only concentrate on existing customer wants and needs but implement a market-driving approach to educate and lead the customer. Thus, marketing capabilities should focus on attaining businesses' goals (Morgan, 2012). Individuals in management and marketing have to be customer focused to achieve their business goals.

Whenever businesses strategically and closely align with the market, by putting customers' needs first, companies should be eager to develop market-driven innovations (Zortea-Johnston, Darroch, & Matear, 2012). *Market-driven strategies* connect with market orientation (MO), which is a classical concept of marketing (Urde, Baumgarth, & Merrilees, 2013) that depicts the way a business implements its marketing concept (Brettel et al., 2012). The market-driven aspect of the strategic innovation paradigm indicates that marketing is usually an important success factor for innovation activities (Thakur & Hale, 2013).

Marketing Mix

Researchers have been discussing the marketing mix since the 1960s. The marketing mix originated in the early 1960s, as a result of Borden identifying 12 controllable marketing elements (Ekankumo, 2012). The concept of the marketing mix is more evolutionary than revolutionary (Anitsal, Girard, & Anitsal, 2012). In 1964,

McCarthy reduced the previous elements to the following four items, the 4Ps: product, price, place, and promotion (Ekankumo, 2012). Because current marketing is more customer focused (Jain, 2013), marketing experts need to explore different methods in the marketing mix (Anitsal et al., 2012; Grönroos & Gummerus, 2014; Jain, 2013). Since its introduction, growth in the commercial landscape and change in consumer and organizational attitudes over the last 60 years have often driven marketing experts to explore new theoretic approaches and to expand the range of the marketing mix concept (Goi, 2009).

Businesses are encountering a rapidly changing business environment, which forms the framework for companies, maps business networks, and drives insightful views on strategic choices (Aspara, Lamberg, Laukia, & Tikkanen, 2013; Benson-Rea, Brodie, & Sima, 2013). Various researchers felt the need to have additional Ps in the marketing mix. These additional Ps meet shifting market demands (Goi, 2009; Jain, 2013; Mohammad, 2015).

The research by Goi (2009) focused on the way the marketing mix applies to marketing. Goi's study stated that, since the 1980s, a number of researchers had proposed additional Ps in the original (i.e., 4Ps marketing framework) marketing mix claiming that the original 4Ps lacked customer orientation). Despite the criticism, the original 4Ps of marketing (i.e., price, product, promotion, and place) remain the framework for the marketing mix. Researchers continue to argue that the 4P model is a limitation for marketing theory and practice and, consequently, is the foundation for marketing (Bašan

et al., 2013; Mohammad, 2015). However, having a more solid strategic plan is also beneficial to business owners.

The strategic plan of marketing is key in conducting business because it reflects the marketing strategic planning processes (Grönroos & Gummerus, 2014). Kindström and Kowalkowskib (2014) indicated that several authors posited that, as the U.S. society becomes more service-based, businesses will have to revise their traditional approaches to strategic management. Market segmentation is another valuable strategic tool.

Business leaders use market segmentation as a resource distribution to improve customer satisfaction and organizational performance. The goal is for businesses to divide large markets into smaller segments with similar wants, purchasing power, buying attitudes, or buying habits (Ching-Chiao & Ching-Fu, 2012). Jain (2013) also found that the service sector of the economy dominates economic activity. In a business's strategic marketing planning process, reviewing traditional approaches is necessary to influence consumers to buy a product or service.

Understanding the marketing mix is necessary for all business firms to succeed. There are several forms of marketing, including transactional marketing (TM), which focuses on attracting customers and, as a result, utilizes the marketing mix (Lamberti & Noci, 2010). Some researchers contended that TM applies to the 4Ps of marketing. Several researchers tried to differentiate TM, sometimes referred as traditional marketing, from RM (Abeysekera & Wickramasinghe, 2012). According to Abeysekera and Wickramasinghe (2012), while TM gears more toward product features than services and

contains moderate customer contact, RM emphasizes benefits of a product with high service, customer contact, and commitment.

In summary, promotion, which is a part of the original marketing mix, involves distributing information about a product or service, product lines, brand, and company. Business leaders use promotion to achieve increased sales, new product acceptance, and the establishment of a company's image through a persuasive message (Mintz & Currim, 2013; Mohammad, 2015). Boomer and Bitner (1981) proposed to add three additional Ps to the original marketing mix, including people, process, and physical evidence because TM, which uses the original marketing mix, was outdated. These additional Ps represent the service industry in which traditional travel agencies operate.

Traditional Travel Agencies

The travel division is an important aspect of the traveling industry because it is an industry that is a part of the heavily increased service industry (Sadeghein, Khoshalhan, & Homyoun, 2012). The service sector accounts for 70% or more of the GDP in countries such as the United States (Kindström & Kowalkowski, 2014; Thakur & Hale, 2013). Travel and tourism generate about 11% of the worldwide GDP (Sadeghein et al., 2012) and, in 2014, U.S. travel and tourism represented 2.6% of the GDP (International Trade Administration (ITA) Office of Travel & Tourism Industries, 2014).

Seventy percent of the U.S. economy involves services (Kindström & Kowalkowski, 2014). In future decades (e.g., 2015–2025), tourism will act as a potential role in various fields, such as human resource, economic growth, wealth improvement, and productivity of a given country with the travel sector being an important entity

(Turgay, Çalicioğlu, & Al-Zyoud, 2013). Scholars such as Turgay et al. (2013) suggested that existing studies point to the fact that the travel industry is not only experiencing fast-paced growth, but the industry also has a higher demand for quality services from contemporary travel consumers. Because this market is a fast-paced industry, the traditional travel agency should conform to avoid being in disarray.

From 1975 to 2015, the traditional travel agency in the United States has experienced continuous changes (Vucetic, 2012). During the 1970s, traditional travel agencies experienced growth and development fueled by an increase in the travel demand (Vucetic, 2012). In addition, Vucetic (2012) argued that travel agencies were once retail, assigning others' products and services in the market, which made their intermediary dominant. During this period, the number of traditional travel agencies increased to meet the demand.

Several researchers reported that the 1980s was another period of transformation for the travel industry (Metzger, 2013; Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2012; Zhang, Song, & Huang, 2009). For example, information communication technologies (ICT) transformed tourism globally (Neuhofer et al., 2012). During the last two decades, the travel industry has evolved and modernized significantly (Zhang et al., 2009). Metzger (2013) revealed that, in the 1980s, agents at traditional U.S. travel agencies had two roles: educating and booking agent. These roles provided customers with counseling and back-office transactions (Metzger, 2013).

Researchers continued to report that traditional travel agencies were experiencing major adjustments in the 1990s. Goeldner and Ritchie (2006) argued that American-

established traditional travel agencies have been undergoing a period of deep organizational change since the mid-1990s. From 1997 to 2004, there was a 36% drop in the number of traditional travel agency locations accredited through the Airlines Reporting Corporation (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2006). During this era, there was a considerable growth in the implementation of new information technologies (Díaz, Martín-Consuegra, & Esteban, 2015). Perhaps these organizational adjustments that travel agencies were experiencing had anything to do with the rise of the World Wide Web.

Berne, Garcia-Gonzalez, and Mugica (2012) claimed that before the growth of the Internet in the travel sector, providers had to use traditional travel agencies. By the mid-1990s, travel agents began to recognize that airlines were seeking to disintermediate travel agents' role in the airline booking process (Metzger, 2013). The 1990s was a breakthrough period for the World Wide Web and, as a result, customers used the Internet heavily to purchase travel, and the role of traditional travel agencies became questionable (Del Chiappa, 2013).

Traditional travel agencies encountered disintermediation, which means removing the intermediary (Del Chiappa, 2013). Traditional travel agencies, as the main intermediaries in travel, encountered a significant challenge of profound disintermediation driven by the enabling power of the Internet (Dolnicar & Laesser, 2007). Before the growth of the Internet and ICT, suppliers had no other option than to use traditional travel intermediaries (Del Chiappa, 2013). Dolnicar and Laesser (2007) found that the most promising future for traditional travel agents includes specializing in

travel settings and components that other booking channels and media are not able to offer. Lawton and Weaver (2009) contended that the supply chain within the travel industry has changed because of new technologies.

The Internet presents opportunities for small traditional travel agencies to harness the benefits of ICTs (Abou-Shouk, Lim, & Megicks, 2013). However, Donicar and Laesser (2007) suggested that travel agencies should have an increasing role in consulting, troubleshooting, and reestablishing operations that focus on frameworks that are less substitutable by other channels and media. The reason behind this recommendation is that a major part of changes experienced in travel relates to the methods in which applying marketing strategies offer modern services (Peng, Xu, & Chen, 2013). Furthermore, the increasing and sharper competition in the national and international areas makes it evident that traditional travel agencies are facing numerous challenges that will continue to increase in the future (Vucetic, 2012). Traditional travel agencies in the United States have obstacles related to emerging technological innovations.

U.S. traditional travel agencies experienced changes. A study conducted by Metzger (2013) focused on the American-based travel agencies that experienced changes before and after the Internet, using a longitudinal case study approach. Metzger purposely selected agents and conducted 25 interviews over the telephone and via Skype. Metzger used various additional sources of print and electronic data to develop a historical narrative about the Internet's influence on travel agents. The interviewees' perceptions in Metzger's indicated that confusion remains among traditional travel agencies concerning

their core products, practices, and purposes in a post-Internet era. Disruption innovation, along with products and services that are easier to use, can disrupt current markets to the point of failure of well-established businesses (Lewis, 2012; Sultan & van de Bunt-Kokhuis, 2012).

Despite challenges experienced by traditional travel agencies, they are still thriving and vital to the economy. Lawton and Weaver (2009) contended that many of the remaining 21,000 American-based traditional travel agencies are prospering financially. Lawton and Weaver also argued that traditional travel agency owners should take advantage of influential forces found in a challenging external environment. A few researchers argued that traditional travel agents provide counseling to consumers (Peng et al., 2013; Turgay et al., 2013). Traditional travel agents were once the main intermediaries between customers and airlines, hotels, and other travel related business (Almunawar et al., 2013).

Turgay et al. (2013) agreed by stating that traditional travel agents play a major role in advising and counseling travel consumers, which is not a feature available on travel websites. Travelers prefer booking their trips through a travel agent rather than booking online because of the social interaction, expertise, and time savings (Peng et al., 2013). Bašan et al. (2013) stated that while travel agencies may not be the only intermediaries in tourism, they are certainly the most important. Turgay et al. posited that travelers have concerns over the future of traditional brick-and-mortar travel agencies, as they have served them well over the years.

Disruption or Marketing Mix

Disruption innovation can disrupt current markets that may result in financial failure of well-established businesses (Lewis, 2012; Sultan & van de Bunt-Kokhuis, 2012). However, Booms and Bitner's (1981) 7P model extended the marketing mix to increase markets in the service industry. In the following subsection, I will discuss the way the extension of the marketing mix applies to traditional travel agencies.

The 4Ps of marketing, refined by McCarthy (1964), consist of product, place, promotion, and price (Mittal, 2014). The 4Ps of marketing include *product*, involving the item or service marketed; *price*, involving the price of product or service; *place*, involving the location in which the product or service is available; *promotion*, involving market communication (Ekankumo, 2012; Jain, 2013). Booms and Bitner expanded the original marketing mix (4Ps) by adding three additional P's (i.e., participants, physical evidence, and process; Ekankumo, 2012; Jain, 2013).

The reason Booms and Bitner (1981) added 3Ps to the original 4Ps was to apply the marketing mix concept to service (Goi, 2009). Booms and Bitner gained well-known acceptance in the service marketing literature with their extension of the 4Ps framework: participants, process, and physical evidence (Rafiq & Ahmed, 1995). Jain (2013) explained that the reason for the additional 3Ps was that marketing is far more customer oriented and that the service industry needed additional Ps. Booms and Bitner theorized that the additional three Ps are a marketing tool that expands the number of controllable variables from the original four to seven.

Several studies utilized Booms and Bitner's 7P marketing mix model in their research (Anitsal et al., 2012; Ekankumo, 2012; Goi, 2009; Jain, 2013; Yip, Chan, & Poon, 2012). Goi (2009) expressed serious doubts about the role of the original marketing mix as a marketing management tool, suggested other approaches that add new limitations to the original mix or replace it with alternative frameworks altogether. TDT explains the way initial customers help demonstrate the concept of the innovative product to other customer groups and, as the innovative product develops, it becomes attractive to even more customers. Finally, products based on the new platform outperform the old and, as a result, the innovation disrupts the old industry, and eventually the disruptive product improves, making it appealing to larger numbers of customers, attracting increasing levels of the mainstream market (Giglierano et al., 2011; Guttentag, 2015).

In contrast, the following conveys the 7Ps and how they relate to travel agencies and their marketing ability. Booms and Bitner (1981) developed and defined the 7Ps (Anitsal et al., 2012), which are considered the travel agencies' marketing mix (Hossain Sarker, Aimin, & Begum, 2012). RM typically results in strong economic, technical, and social ties among the stakeholders reducing their transaction costs (Miquel-Romero, Caplliure-Giner, & Adame-Sánchez, 2014). In the following paragraphs, I will define the 7Ps of marketing with traditional travel agencies:

Product or Service means looking at the product, service, or both and determining if it meets the marketing needs of the target audience. Service products cannot be measured (Hossain Sarker et al., 2012). Quality is when the product or service relates to

the customers' demands and when workers and managers of travel companies must offer high-quality services to their customers (Butnaru & Bordeianu, 2012).

Price is both economical and psychological, and, in the marketing mix, it affects the level of demand and the customers' expectations of products and/or services (Anitsal et al., 2012). Customers can choose price in the travel industry (Hossain Sarker et al., 2012). Additionally, the workers and the managers of travel companies must offer their customers low prices (Butnaru & Bordeianu, 2012). Price creation is one of the keys to profitability for most small businesses (Fort, Haltiwanger, Jarmin, & Miranda, 2013). Travel agency leaders may deliver a certain image about themselves through price structures (Chellappa, Sin, & Siddarth, 2011).

Place is the actual space a company's product or service is available for consumption. According to Anitsal et al. (2012), place creates value for customers by making the goods or services offered in locations that are accessible. Booms and Bitner (1981) stated that for services, customer accessibility involves participants, physical evidence, and process at the time of service delivery.

Promotion entails all the channels that a company can use to tell the target customer about the product or service. Promotion is a critical factor for businesses in the service marketing mix (Hossain Sarker et al., 2012). Promotion aims to persuade customers to choose a product or service. *Physical Evidence* is the way a company's product or service is accessible to the customer (Anital et al., 2012).

People in the marketing mix represent everyone who is a part of the reception of a service. This medium requires recruitment, training, and motivation to create customer

satisfaction (Charoensettasilp & Wu, 2013). However, travel agents or employees are responsible for providing advice to customers and remain courteous and enthusiastic when responding to customers' questions (Jain, 2013).

Processes guarantee availability and the proper quality of services (Jain, 2013). A process indicates the way in which travel agency leaders take a specific action (Hossain Sarker et al., 2012). This medium can improve the procedure of providing services to customers that can lead to repurchase and sales increase (Jain, 2013).

The marketing mix for traditional travel agencies is service marketing (Rafiq & Ahmed, 1995). Travel agencies are service providers, and all parts of the mix are under the direct control of the service providers (Rafiq & Ahmed, 1995). Marketing managers have the role of allocating available resources among various competitive plans of the marketing mix (Jain, 2013). However, Christensen (1997) stated that innovators should handle the early market uncertainty through *experimenting* and pursue small investments early (Gigliano et al., 2011).

Traditional Travel Agency Marketing

Some scholars suggest that smaller traditional travel agencies have a reduced number of stakeholders and investors. For instance, Sellers-Rubio and Nicolau-Gonzalez (2009) claimed that the fewer the stakeholders, the fewer the individuals that small traditional travel agency leaders have to convince, which means they similarly rely upon a relatively common set of operating and performance standards. However, the goal of marketing management is to find and satisfy customers, consumers, and guests

(Holjevac & Basan, 2009). Therefore, marketing is the first step in all aspects related to traditional travel agency performance.

Holjevac and Basan (2009) suggested that travel agency leaders should (a) offer what the travel agency has and not what it does not have, (b) sell all capacities at the most favorable terms, (c) have presence on the market continuously, (d) stay up-to-date of market trends, (e) adjust offerings to demand, (f) be a leader in the marketplace, (g) have good promotion that increase the profitability and reputation of the travel agency, and (h) make the travel agency distinctively guarantee the quality of travel agency marketing.

According to Alipour et al. (2011), marketing is a management trend in the travel industry that includes prediction of travelers' needs and their satisfaction currently and in the future. Mansor et al. (2011) stated that advertising is the most relevant tool in any marketing activities that uses several methods to attract attention, arouse interest, convey information, and induce the traveler. For this reasons, marketing managers at small traditional travel agencies need to have more stakeholders for products and services. Marketing products and services to potential stakeholders gives the opportunity of maximization.

Travel agents play an essential role in worldwide travel (Satit, Tat, Rasli, Chin, & Sukati, 2012). However, Satit et al. (2012) also argued that one of the major problems faced by travel agents is when customers are dissatisfied with travel products because dissatisfaction can interfere with the marketing mix and the needs of the customer. When it comes to marketing, the use of the Internet can have a negative effect on traditional

travel agencies by creating online price transparency, increasing price competition, and reducing customer loyalty (Del Chiappa, 2013).

The Internet has changed the landscape of the travel distribution process, which has resulted in travel agencies' lower business performance (Tsiotsou & Ratten, 2010). Van Bruggen et al. (2010) found that advances in information technology affected routes to numerous markets. These changes led to significant changes in how businesses, potential customers, and customers interact with one another. The focus of Van Bruggen et al.'s study was to identify the new operating realities that drive the phenomenon of distribution channels and provide an overview of the likely changes in distribution. These authors concluded that firms should guarantee that their IT capabilities and support systems allow the essential functions with customer interactions across various channel formats (Van Bruggen et al., 2010). In contrast, Satit et al. (2012) posited that some of the problems that traditional travel agencies are facing stem from a lack of understanding and planning of the marketing mix.

In a post-dot-com world, marketing managers are obtaining the knowledge to cope with a host of new marketing features that have emerged from the Internet (Jain, 2013). Search engines are a dominant source in customers' use of the Internet to access travel products and services (Xiang & Pan, 2011). Many travelers search and plan their trips through the Internet (Elhaj, 2012). Information technologies represent an entry barrier to the marketing of many services (Huang, 2013) offered through travel agencies. However, travel agency customers desire innovation in services and products (Almunawar et al., 2013).

Lawton and Weaver (2009) interviewed 19 owners of traditional travel agencies and revealed that negative public perceptions of travel agencies were a common theme that emerged from the interviews. Some aspects contributed to these perceptions, including the role of the Internet, the negative influence of inexperienced travel agents, constant negative media coverage, and failure to attract young, new travel agents (Lawton & Weaver, 2009). In the study, some of the owners interviewed stated that customers think that they can find lower prices on the Internet and, because of this perception; there is no real value in using a traditional travel agency.

The customers' perceived value is important to travel agencies to develop a lasting relationship with customers (Malik, 2012). Kuo et al. (2012) conducted a study to investigate how perceived value interrelates with customer satisfaction. The researchers suggested that when both customer satisfaction and perceived value are high, customers would have high levels of loyalty (Kuo et al., 2012), which would prompt customers to purchase services or products. On the other hand, Hung and Petrick (2012) applied the motivation opportunity ability (MOA) for travelers' intentions to purchase a travel product. This model suggests that motivation, opportunity, and ability are major factors that influence travel intentions (Hung & Petrick, 2012). Results validated the MOA model as a suitable fit for travel decisions. The MOA model may alleviate threats to the traditional travel agency. TDT suggests that new technology and business model embedded in the disruptive innovation provides a cost advantage that attracts customers from the established product or service to the disruptive one, resulting in the established business losing market share (Lewis, 2012).

While some scholars have reported threats to traditional travel agencies, others have reported strengths. Traditional travel agents still have an importance in the tourism area. Dolnicar and Laesser's (2007) study revealed that the demand for travel agencies drives the desire to book a package or choice of transportation services. Huang et al. (2009) suggested that despite the impact of the Internet and the start of online bookings, traditional travel agents are still pivotal. Because of this suggestion, Lawton and Weaver (2009) stated that many of the remaining American-based retail travel agencies are still prospering.

However, Ching-Chiao and Ching-Fu (2012) suggested that the importance of the Internet demonstrates the need for tourism organizations, such as travel agencies, to create their websites to facilitate marketing and e-commerce transactions. Innovation technologies, such as the Internet, are more significant to the management and marketing of travel organizations (Ching-Chiao & Ching-Fu, 2012). Huang et al. (2009) stated that Bitner and Booms observed that retail travel agents and consumers play an essential role in the travel distribution channel, which coincides with one of their additional 3Ps, people.

The Internet is a powerful marketing tool for travel agencies. To be competitive in the current marketplace, it is necessary for travel workers to implement Internet technology to meet customers' needs more effectively (Ching-Chiao & Ching-Fu, 2012). However, the effective use of the Internet for web-based marketing and e-commerce is still a challenge in the travel industry. Because of this challenge, Christensen's (1997) TDT has had a substantial effect on the traditional travel agency industry.

Travel Distribution Channel

In the travel industry, distribution connects the producers of tourism services to their customers (Katsoni & Venetsanopoulou, 2012). Distribution is the path through which travel organizations carry out the communication and sales of their products and services (Katsoni & Venetsanopoulou, 2012). Several researchers expressed that, over the years, channels of distribution have changed. For example, Singer et al. (2010) argued that distribution channels evolve in complex ways from the threat of previous traditional sales channels by large organizations and technology. This medium was an era of the global distribution system. The global distribution system in the 1960s was the first major step in the growth of digital distribution channels for an industry that relied on the telephone, teletype, and mail for bookings (Thakran & Verma, 2013).

Booms and Bitner (1981) argued that travel agents have a vital role in the travel distribution channel (Katsoni & Venetsanopoulou, 2012). On the contrast, some researchers stated that marketing in the travel arena has not focused on the customer. Tsiotsou and Ratten (2010) posited that marketing in the travel sector has become increasingly less important due to the large diversity of consumers' needs, motivation, and behaviors, and the changing of the global economic and social conditions. Yassine, Constantin, and Pramjeeth (2012) argued that travel agents have to use more aggressive marketing techniques to influence demand.

The start of a new millennium changed the process of distribution channels. Azada, Aliakbar, Mohsen, and Kordalivand (2012) posited that the new millennium promised new technologies that help business provide their products and services through

different advertisement channels. Elhaj (2012) reported that, in 2002, distribution changes occurred when major U.S. airlines revealed a \$10 billion loss, which \$7.3 billion of it came from the distribution of tickets to the consumers. Because of advanced and interactive technology, traditional businesses struggle to keep the path for their products and services cleared to reach their customers.

Distribution channels are a crucial way for firms to market their products and services. Currently, with the arrival of the Internet as a new distribution channel in recent years, the intermediation role that traditional travel agencies played is constantly changing (Huang et al., 2009). Distribution and communication in tourism are critical processes between management and the customer (Singer et al., 2010). Various researchers pointed out that new technologies play an important role in distribution (Ching-Chiao & Chink-Fu, 2012; Katsoni & Venetsanopoulou, 2012; Zhang et al. 2009). With the high consumer demand for technology use, distributors are forced to be well informed about the products represented (Tortato & Marx, 2010) to attract consumers. Martin, Gil-Pechuan, and Soriano (2011) found that the mere use of e-commerce or the same usage of the Internet as a distribution channel is standard practice in the industry to gain competitive advantage.

Regarding the marketing mix, the distribution channel plays an important role. Distribution channels are the methods through which the travel industry communicates and sells products and services (Huang et al., 2009). The distribution channel is a dynamic component of the travel industry and one of the few elements of the marketing mix that contributes to the competitiveness of businesses and influences other aspects of

the marketing mix, such as price, product, and promotion (Elhaj, 2012). The travel industry supports distribution channels that are Internet-based because many travelers are searching and planning trips through the Internet (Elhaj, 2012).

However, Granados, Gupta, and Kauffman (2012) reported some arguments amongst researchers about distribution channels and pricing. For instance, Granados et al. indicated that while some researchers found analytical and empirical support for lower prices on the Internet relative to traditional channels, other researchers found higher prices on the Internet along with price dispersion. Playing the intermediary role is a portion of the total sales revenue, and it affects the existence and success of traditional travel agencies (Almunawar et al., 2013).

Throughout the literature review, I have made consistent references to the marketing mix, along with the Internet and technology, and the impact on traditional travel agencies. The literature does lend support to the idea that emerging technology impacts the marketing strategies of businesses, especially the traditional travel agency. However, the literature provides insufficient information on what marketing strategies the small traditional travel agency needs to attain and retain customers for profit maximization.

Transition and Summary

In summary, a major issue emerged in the literature review, which is that disruption innovation has created challenges for small traditional travel agencies in the form of difficulties in obtaining and retaining customers. The small traditional travel agency is facing mortality with disruption innovation. Because of this problem, and the

fact the travel industry is a service sector, business owners and marketers are searching for ways to obtain and retain customers.

In Section 1, I presented the foundation and background of the study, problem and purpose statements, nature of the study, conceptual framework, and a review of the literature. Within the literature review section, I discussed the impact of small businesses in the United States, marketing efforts and strategies, marketing mix, and traditional travel agencies, along with their marketing and distribution channels. In Section 2, I will highlight the project, research design and methodology, data collection and analysis, and the reliability and validity of this study. In Section 3, I will provide a presentation of the findings, application to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action and further study, reflections, summary, and conclusions.

Section 2: The Project

Section 1 included the basis of the study, along with major components of the literature review. Even though small businesses are key to the U.S. economy, small traditional travel agencies face adversities related to: (a) limited resources, (b) technological innovations, (c) intermediation, (d) marketing channels, and (e) customer relations (Dolnicar & Ring, 2014; Lamberti & Noci, 2010; Prasad et al., 2012). These challenges make small traditional travel agencies vulnerable to profit maximization. The purpose of this study was to explore what online marketing strategies leaders of small traditional travel agencies have used to attract and retain customers successfully. I selected Christensen's (1997) TDT as the conceptual framework for this study. The information I will provide in Section 2 includes a summary of the purpose statement, the role of the researcher and the participants, and the population and sampling for the study. I will also provide the research method and design, ethical research, data collection instruments and technique, data analysis, and reliability and validity for the study in Section 2.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this multicase qualitative case study was to explore the online marketing strategies leaders of small traditional travel agencies have used to successfully obtain and retain customers. The specific population of this study consisted of three small traditional travel agency leaders, located in the state of Maryland, who had used marketing strategies to obtain and retain customers successfully. This study's findings may impact social change by helping other leaders of small traditional travel agencies

better position themselves to improve performance and to provide local employment and employee spending.

Role of the Researcher

Researchers have to take on a variety of roles in the data collection process to ensure their research is credible (Unluer, 2012). I incurred various roles to explore online marketing strategies leaders of small traditional travel agencies have used to successfully obtain and retain customers. The researcher is the driver for obtaining data from study respondents (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). High quality qualitative research depends on the knowledge, abilities, and honesty of the researcher conducting the analysis (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). The role of the researcher has changed dramatically because of the use of scientific tools and new technologies and the increase in information availability (Kyvik, 2013). Researchers face many challenges while conducting research, including limited time, scarce resources, insufficient proficiency, and incomplete information (Suri, 2011). Despite these difficulties, researchers must perform a variety of tasks, including interacting with study participants, networking with other researchers, managing resources, conducting research activities, and following guidelines to publish their research (Kyvik, 2013). In addition, researchers must structure their interviews with open-ended questions starting with *who, what, when, where, why, and how* (Wolgemuth et al., 2015). As the driver of this study, I interacted with participants and maintained objectivity.

As the researcher, I have some experience related to small traditional travel agencies because I owned and operated several small businesses for several years,

including an online travel agency. *The Belmont Report* provides ethical guidelines in regards to the following principles: (a) respecting individuals involved in the research process, (b) ensuring adequate and nonthreatening research environments, and (c) maximizing research benefits without harming anyone (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Following these guidelines, I took the following actions related to my study participants: maintained their anonymity, accepted and reported their answers as stated, treated them with respect, and shared the results with them.

More familiarity with a topic can create a loss of objectivity (Unluer, 2012). However, following ethical guidelines, as stated in the *Belmont Report*, is a primary responsibility of a researcher when interacting with human subjects. To avoid subjectivity, I used several techniques, such as interviews, observations, and review of documentation. I solely relied on data collected. Reflexivity, on the researcher's part, is an essential element of the qualitative research and interviewing process because of the self-awareness of the researcher to potential biases (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). A researcher must be conscious of the possible effects of perceived bias on data collection and adhere to ethical codes (Unluer, 2012). I was the primary collection instrument in this study.

As one of the data collection processes, the interview protocol provides a useful way for researchers to learn about the world of others (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). The interview protocol involves several extremely important activities, including probing, remaining silent, asking follow-up questions, building relationships, and learning from

others' experiences (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Xu & Storr, 2012). I used an interview protocol, along with semistructured interviews, to aid in answering the overarching research question: What online marketing strategies do leaders of small traditional travel agencies use to obtain and retain customers? In qualitative research, where evidence is not present, researchers should become the main instrument for data collection using semistructured interviews (Xu & Storr, 2012).

Participants

The purpose of this study was to explore the online marketing strategies leaders of small traditional travel agencies have used to successfully obtain and retain customers. In a qualitative case study, the researchers recruit the study participants (Englander, 2012; Gould et al., 2015; Merlo, Goodman, McClenaghan, & Fritz, 2013). The selection process for the identification and selection of study participants was extremely important because these participants must possess knowledge and experience related to the overarching research question of a given study to be able to provide useful information by answering the interview questions (Englander, 2012; Gould et al., 2015; Ren, Zhang, Zhang, & Shen, 2015). For this reason, I selected small traditional travel agency owners and managers who had implemented marketing strategies to obtain and retain customers successfully from three small travel agencies located in the state of Maryland to participate in this study.

To gain access to participants, I sent e-mails and made telephone calls to owners and managers of small traditional travel agencies giving them information about the study and asking for their participation. Participants in a research study must be able and

willing to participate. If each potential participant is willing to participate in a given study, each participant must complete an informed consent form (Faden, Beauchamp, & Kass, 2014; Merlo et al., 2013; Tamariz, Palacio, Robert, & Marcus, 2013). For these reasons, I asked each participant to complete an informed consent form (see Appendix A). I established a professional working relationship with study participants by explaining that their answers to the interview questions were critical to the success of the study. I also explained to participants the potential positive impact that my study may have on the research community. These strategies were highly recommended by several researchers (Harvey, 2014; McIntosh & Morse, 2015; Trier-Bieniek, 2012; Wolgemuth et al., 2015).

Research Method and Design

Three research methodologies exist, including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Bryman, 2012; Kaczynski et al., 2013; McIntosh & Morse, 2015). This subsection will include a description of each of these three research methods as well as a discussion of the research methodology used in this study. Finally, this section will also include a discussion of the research design approach employed in this study.

Research Method

The qualitative research methodology focuses on understanding participants' perspectives, experiences, decision-making processes, and phenomena (Elo et al., 2014; Kaczynski et al., 2013; Stake, 2013; Wolgemuth et al., 2015). To reach this understanding, the qualitative research methodology consists of applying multiple procedures to collect data, such as personal interviews, focus groups, observations, and

review of documentation (Elo et al., 2014; Kaczynski et al., 2013; McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Furthermore, the qualitative research methodology is most suitable when researchers are trying to obtain participants' insights about a given problem or issue (Ginsberg & Sinacore, 2013; Stake, 2013; Yang, 2013). Because the purpose of my study was to explore the marketing strategies leaders of small traditional travel agencies have used to successfully obtain and retain customers in an innovative technological world, the qualitative research methodology was the most appropriate method for my study.

Quantitative and mixed-methods methodologies were not suitable for my study. Researchers employ the quantitative research methodology when using scientific theories to validate the outcomes of previous studies (Kaczynski et al., 2013; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011), which was not the focus of my study. In addition, researchers employ the quantitative research methodology when their focus is the relationships between independent and dependent variables (Allwood, 2012; Cronin-Gilmore, 2012; Venkatesh, Brown, & Bala, 2013). Because I was neither testing a theory nor testing relationships between variables, the quantitative research methodology was not a suitable methodology for my study.

The mixed-methods research methodology combines characteristics from the qualitative and quantitative research methodologies (Rittichainuwat & Rattanaphinanchai, 2015; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011; Venkatesh et al., 2013), which was not appropriate for my study. Researchers use the mixed-methods research methodology when neither a qualitative nor a quantitative approach is adequate as a stand-alone method to conduct a study (Kaczynski et al., 2013; Rittichainuwat & Rattanaphinanchai,

2015; Wisdom, Cavaleri, Onwuegbuzie, & Green, 2012). Since the qualitative method was adequate and appropriate for my study, mixed-methods would not have been a suitable choice.

Research Design

Researchers use a multicase study research design approach when their goal is to understand a problem in-depth and comprehensively within its real-life context (Hacklin & Wallnöfer, 2012; Klonoski, 2013; Wahyuni, 2012). A case study provides the researcher with a framework to conduct observations and analyses of behavior (Hacklin & Wallnöfer; Klonoski, 2013; Wahyuni, 2012). Case studies offer a significant methodological approach when existing viewpoints appear insufficient because of little experimental corroboration (Hacklin & Wallnöfer, 2012). In addition, case studies are used in business management to interpret the how and why of certain decisions and the impact on organizational design, human resource development, or resource use; the analysis of external influences and the impact on the business; and the development of *best practices* for a company (Klonoski, 2013). Furthermore, a case study research design often involves in-depth interviews with participants and key informants (Stake, 2013) and the development of truthful open-ended discussions to ensure that the responses yield data that reflect the participants' experiences without bias (Merlo et al., 2013).

I employed a case study design because, as the researcher, I needed to thoroughly understand online marketing strategies leaders of small traditional travel agencies have used to successfully obtain and retain customers. In addition, there is insufficient research on the use of online marketing strategies by leaders of small traditional travel agencies.

Using multiple data collection methods allowed me to penetrate each case and cross analyze data to find commonalities using a case study design.

Researchers implementing the phenomenological design penetrate deep into the human experience (Englander, 2012; Kafle, 2013; Merlo, Goodman, McClenaghan, & Fritz, 2013) and explore the lived experiences and perspective of participants (Kafle, 2013; Merlo et al., 2013; Ziakas & Boukas, 2013). In addition, in a phenomenological design, researchers tend to choose interviews based on their interest in the meaning of a phenomenon lived by other subjects, which is more reflective than observational (Englander, 2012; Kafle 2013; Ziakas & Boukas, 2013). However, in a phenomenological design researchers do not rely on multiple sources of evidence to obtain a deeper understanding. By relying on multiple sources of evidence, a case study typically looks in-detail at how change unfolds based on a series of multiple observations and multiple sources (Klonoski, 2013; Stake, 2013; Stewart, 2012). For these reasons, I did not select a phenomenology as the research design approach for my study.

Other research designs were not suitable for this study. Ethnographic and narrative research design approaches only involve the in-depth study of cultural phenomena within a natural setting (Baskerville & Myers, 2015; Cruz & Higginbottom, 2013; Deppermann, 2013). In addition, ethnography involves the understanding of the day-to-day lives of the culture being studied (Baskerville & Myers, 2015; Cruz & Higginbottom, 2013; Petty et al., 2012). Narrative favors a unified, coherent, continuous concept of identity (Deppermann, 2013; Dierckx de Casterlé, Gastmans, Bryon, & Denier, 2012; Petty et al., 2012). My study's focus was not the day-to-day lives of a

culture or a concept of identity, and for these reasons, I did not select these research design approaches for my study.

Thematic saturation occurs once there are no new themes (Dworkin, 2012; Marshall et al., 2013; Schell, Patel, Steinhauser, Ammarell, & Tulskey, 2012). Saturation occurs whenever researchers cannot obtain any new information from the participants of the research study (Dworkin, 2012; Marshall et al., 2013; Morse, 2015; Shen et al., 2014). Data saturation indicates that the researchers have collected sufficient information to adequately reflect participants' perspectives (Kolb, 2012; Marshall et al., 2013; Morse, 2015). Data saturation is a vital part of qualitative research (Bradley et al., 2015; Dworkin, 2012; Finfgeld-Connett, 2014; Morse, 2015). This multicase study required that I conduct interviews with small traditional travel agency leaders to gather data, and I achieved data saturation when participants' responses did not provide any new information and only confirmed what participants had already stated, resulting in no new themes generated.

Population and Sampling

This study involved three small traditional travel agency businesses located in the state of Maryland. As the researcher, I sought to obtain an in-depth understanding of issues surrounding small traditional travel agencies and their ability to obtain and retain customers through their marketing efforts in an innovative society. Consequently, I needed to select a sampling method that reflected the scope of my study. Selecting the appropriate sampling method is essential to ensure that the sample selected is a representation of the larger population (Elo et al., 2014; Englander, 2012; Robinson,

2014; Suri, 2011). Researchers use the purposeful sampling method in qualitative studies when they must interact with participants possessing knowledge of the research topic (Chidlow et al., 2014; Elo et al., 2014; Gagliardi, 2012).

Purposeful sampling consists of multiple methods, including typical, convenience, extreme, snowball, and criterion methods (Gagliardi, 2012; Polit & Beck, 2012; Suri, 2011). Inspired by several studies (Cater & Forssell, 2012; Nymar, Mattiasson, Henriksson, & Kiessling, 2014; Pane, Rocco, Miller, & Salmon, 2013), I used Patton's (1991, 2002) criterion sampling to obtain information-rich data for my study. The criterion sampling method involves identifying and selecting participants that meet certain criteria for the study (Robinson, 2014; Schiller et al., 2015; Suri, 2011). Criterion sampling helped me filter the participant pool by identifying only relevant participants to extract meaningful information, which were leaders of small traditional travel agencies having used successfully online marketing strategies to obtain and retain customers.

Some researchers expressed what they believe constitutes a sufficient sample size. For example, Suresh and Chandrashekara (2012) posited that a study must have a sufficient sample size related to the goal of the study. If a sample size is inadequate, the outcome may not be useful. For instance, an insufficient sample size study can be a waste of resources since it may not produce useful results (Suresh & Chandrashekara, 2012). Qualitative studies do not have predetermined sample sizes because the optimal sample size depends on the research questions, type of data, and goal of the research study (Dworkin, 2012; Elo et al., 2014; Gagliardi, 2012; Kaczynski et al., 2014). Sample size focuses more on data saturation than representation (Bryman, 2012; McIntosh & Morse,

2015; Suresh & Chandrashekara, 2012). Researchers achieve data saturation when additional information has no real value (Bryman, 2012; Dierckx de Casterlé et al., 2012; Suri, 2011). Close-ended research questions result in faster data saturation (Dierckx de Casterlé et al., 2012; Englander, 2012; Suri, 2011). As a result, I asked participants open-ended questions to gain a variety of information.

In this study, data saturation occurred when participants' responses echoed one another with no new information. The sample was representative of leaders of small traditional travel agencies having used online marketing strategies to obtain and retain customers successfully. Previous researchers had small sample sizes in their case studies about the barriers of traditional travel agencies during disintermediation (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012; Fuentes, 2011; Gorgievski, Ascalon, & Stephan, 2011; Hansen & Hamilton, 2011; Huang et al., 2009; Huang et al., 2011; Huang, 2013). By implementing a case study design, three small traditional travel agencies were sufficient for this study because rigor was more important than numbers, it established reliability of the study methods over time, and provided a precise representation of the population studied, as recommended by several researchers (Petty et al., 2012; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011; Venkatesh et al., 2013). If I had not reached data saturation after interviewing the three participants, I would have recruited and interviewed additional leaders of small traditional travel agencies that met the criteria for this study, to generate additional data until no new data would emerge from the interviews.

To explain a specific phenomenon in a business case study, the relationships between related events have had to already occurred (Hacklin & Wallnöfer, 2012;

Klonoski, 2013; Wynn & Williams, 2012). Researchers using a case study research design; must identify appropriate participants, accommodate participants' schedule for interviews, create professional relationships with participants, develop a nonthreatening environment for interviewees, and ask open-ended interview questions to generate high-quality data collection resulting in reliable results (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Moll, 2012; Suresh & Chandrashekara, 2012). The overarching research question helped me identify the appropriate participants.

The criterion was that all participants in this study would be leaders of a small traditional travel agency with successful experience in obtaining and retaining customers. To gain access to the participants, I called all prospective participants. Interviews took place at the participants' business establishments. Researchers achieve data saturation with their sample size when no additional information has real value (Bryman, 2012; Dierckx de Casterlé et al., 2012; Suri, 2011). The selected sample size allowed me to reach data saturation, as additional information given by these three participants had no real value. Finally, I identified themes stemming from the responses obtained from the target population.

Ethical Research

As part of ethical procedures in research, permission is necessary from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). After receiving IRB approval (the IRB approval number for this study is 05-24-16-0291689), I asked potential participants to participate in my study. All willing participants were required to read and sign a consent form. Festinger, Dugosh, Marlowe, and Clements (2014) divided the informed consent

process into two parts: creating a consent form and presenting the consent information to research participants. The informed consent form lists the nature of the study, expectations from participants, potential risks, benefits, and my contact information.

There were no incentives for participating in this study. If a participant chose to withdraw from the study, the participant was able to withdraw from the study by informing the researcher. Researchers and institutions are ethically and legally responsible for protecting participants' privacy and the confidentiality of data (Beskow et al., 2012). To protect the right of the participants, data from the study will remain in a safe place for at least 5 years. I stored all data collected in a password-protected area of my computer or in a locked file cabinet if in printed format. The success of a research study depends on the participants' confidence that the researchers will protect the privacy of the participants' information (Beskow et al., 2012). I used alias names to protect the privacy of study participants. The next section will include the data collection instruments, data collection technique, and data organization techniques.

Data Collection Instruments

The goal of the data collection process in this qualitative case study was to explore online marketing strategies leaders of small traditional travel agencies have used to obtain and retain customers successfully in an innovative technological world. Because the researcher uncovers experience, procedures, and fundamental instruments in a study (Berger, 2015; McIntosh & Morse, 2015; Unluer, 2012), I was the main data collection instrument in my study. An important data collection instrument is the use of semistructured interviews, which use open-ended questions (Dierckx de Casterlé et al.,

2012; McIntosh & Morse, 2015; Schatz, 2012). Open-ended questions start with words like *who, what, where, when, why, and how* (Englander, 2012; McIntosh & Morse, 2015; Schatz, 2013). Using open-ended questions allows a researcher to assist the interviewees in sharing their perspectives and experiences (Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2013; McIntosh & Morse, 2015; Wahyuni, 2012). Conducting interviews, utilizing open-ended questions, was one of the sources of data collection in this study. Open-ended questions are essential to the semistructured interviews.

A case study uses multiple sources of evidence. It is through questioning where participants share rich data concerning their experiences (Irvine et al., 2013; McIntosh & Morse, 2015; Wahyuni, 2012). Experiences are those events often observed through sensory perceptions (Tufford & Newman, 2012; Wahyuni, 2012; Wynn & Williams, 2012). Researchers interview participants on topics applicable to the study. Researchers use interviews to obtain knowledge about perceptions held by other people (Englander, 2012; Wolgemuth et al., 2015; Wynn & Williams, 2012). Case studies also involve observation and analysis of behavior (Klonoski, 2013; Stake, 2013; Stewart, 2012). As part of the data collection process, I observed and documented each participant's behavior. Documentation refers to written documents that include textbooks, articles, notes, and minutes of meetings (Cruz, 2013; Petty, 2012; Unluer, 2012). I used the review of documentation data technique in my study. I reviewed advertising direct mailings, business cards, competitors' advertisements, and websites to compare each with interview question responses and this study's research question. I observed that each

participant uses websites, most customer loyalty and price matching to compete with competitors, and one uses business cards.

To enhance the reliability and validity of the data collection instrument, I used member checking, also known as member validation. Member checking is the process of taking thoughts back to participants for their validation (Harper & Cole, 2012; Harvey, 2015; Houghton, Casey Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). Researchers use member checking to confirm the accuracy of participants' responses by restating to the participants their responses, allowing participants to make any corrections (Harper & Cole, 2012; Harvey, 2015; Houghton et al., 2013). I used member checking to ensure the legitimacy of the data collection instrument. Appendices B and C include the data collection instruments.

Data Collection Technique

In qualitative case studies, data collection is a unique process. I used various data collection techniques. One of the goals of a case study is to show the important relationship between the research question and the data collection procedures (Englander, 2012; Houghton et al., 2013; Stake, 2013). The data collection procedures included interviews, observation, and review of documentation. I used an interview protocol that included contacting each participant to schedule an interview. Interviews are often longer and thus richer in terms of nuances and depth (Englander, 2012; Petty, 2012; Schatz, 2012). I conducted semistructured interviews with each participant, as suggested by several researchers (Merlo et al., 2013; Schatz, 2012; Unluer, 2012).

I established a working relationship with participants when entering each business facility. I started each interview with an introduction. I observed participants at the time

of each interview, including straightened posture, shoulder movement, eagerness, amusement, and widen eyes, which allowed me to benchmark data with interviews questions and participants' responses and company documents. I obtained and reviewed marketing materials and websites for the participants' businesses to compare with interview responses. Most participants' responses to interview questions matched their nonverbal cues and were consistent with the information I found in company documents and this study's overarching research question. Observations should take place in participants' surroundings and in conjunction with interviews, life stories, and document review (Harvey, 2015; Petty, 2012; Zahle, 2012). I used an observation chart to categorize nonverbal cues to triangulate with interview responses and company documents.

An advantage of this data collection technique is credibility, which allows checking for the representativeness of the data in their entirety (Houghton et al., 2013; Petty, 2012; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). However, disadvantages could be certain biases or subjectivity (Englander, 2012; McIntosh & Morse, 2015; Stake, 2013). Member checking is the process of taking thoughts back to participants for their validation (Harper & Cole, 2012; Harvey, 2015; Houghton et al., 2013). I engaged in member checking activities in my study to ensure data validation.

Data Organization Techniques

Data organization is a critical part of the qualitative research process (Elo et al., 2014; Marshall et al., 2013; Unluer, 2012). I am the only individual that has access to the data. I only recorded interviews with the participants' consent. A password-protected

Excel spreadsheet was used to store data collected from notes, narratives, interviews, participant observations, and document review. I safeguarded participants' privacy and data, reassuring participants about the security of their information, as recommended by Beskow (2012), Merlo et al. (2013), and Zahle (2012). Data collected were filed away on a separate flash drive, in addition to being stored on my personal computer. I will keep both the flash drive and my personal computer locked for 5 years after the completion of this study. I will maintain all data, as promoted by several researchers (Beskow, 2012; Merlo et al., 2013, Zahle, 2012).

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is very complex (Dierckx de Casterlé et al., 2012; Venkatesh et al., 2012; Wayhuni, 2012). Data analysis allows researchers to interpret the meaning of the research data (Elo et al., 2014; Moll, 2012; Pierre & Jackson, 2014). Several authors (Hamersly, 2015; McIntosh & Morse, 2015; & Moll, 2012) recommended selecting an appropriate method for data analysis that can directly address interview questions and provide thorough results. Four types of triangulation exist: (a) data triangulation, (b) investigator triangulation, (c) theory triangulation, and (d) methodological triangulation (Bryman, 2012; Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014; Franco et al., 2014). Because this was a case study implementing a collection of sources, I used methodological triangulation to ensure the validity of this research. Methodological triangulation uses more than one method for triangulation (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012; Houghton et al., 2013; Petty, 2012). I triangulated different data from various data methods through cross verification.

Several researchers (McIntosh & Morse, 2015; Palinkas, 2013; Walshe, 2011) recommend that researchers use multiple methods in the data analysis phase. These methods include (a) member checking; (b) interview protocol; (c) methodological triangulation; and (d) HyperRESEARCH, which is a text-retrieval software for in-depth exploration of data, to identify themes (Bernstein et al., 2013). While member checking involves study participants, reviewing their responses and contributions to ensure accuracy of their responses (Saldaña, 2012; Reilly, 2013; Winter & Collins, 2015), the interview protocol is a guide that consists of interview questions, scripts, reminders, and prompts for the interviewer (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Shavers & Moore, 2014; Xu & Storr, 2012). Researchers use methodological triangulation for the purpose of data analyses because it allows them to use two or more data collection techniques (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012; Houghton et al., 2013; Petty, 2012). For this study, I used qualitative observation and interviews.

The interviews required transcription and coding. After I transcribed each interview, I organized data using HyperRESEARCH to identify themes (Bernstein et al., 2013). HyperRESEARCH allows a researcher to code and retrieve, build theories, and conduct an analysis of open-ended questions (ResearchWare, Inc., 2013). I used codes for each participant interviewed. The codes used were a letter (I) and a number (1–3). The letter “I” represented the participant, and the numbers 1–3 represented each participant. I used an observation chart to document nonverbal cues during interviews to compare with interview questions and participants’ responses.

After analyzing the data collected from the interview responses, I triangulated the data with the observation chart along with the document review notes. Methodological triangulation uses more than one method for triangulation (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012; Houghton et al., 2013; Petty, 2012). Researchers use the sequential process to identify themes and factors in each case and conduct a cross-case analysis (Dierckx de Casterlé et al., 2012; Petty et al., 2012; Stewart, 2012). For this reason, I used the sequential process to identify themes and factors in each case to conduct a cross-case analysis. The data produced with qualitative methods are often vast, as researchers extract significant facts, distinguish relevant themes, and determine meaning beyond the facts (Dierckx de Casterlé et al., 2012; Petty et al., 2012; Stake, 2013). Overlapping themes that correlate with the literature and Christensen's disruptive innovation theory were very important in my study.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability is the extent to which the findings can be replicated (Ali & Yusof, 2012). Validity refers to how well a researcher designs and executes a qualitative study to yield credible findings (Venkatesh et al., 2012). This subsection will include a discussion of issues related to the reliability and validity of this study.

Reliability

Data reliability and validity are important to research analysis. Using coding patterns to identify variations, similarity, patterns and relationships among the data, adds credibility that the results are reliable (Houghton et al., 2013; Petty et al., 2012; Schatz, 2012). In qualitative studies, researchers must focus on four criteria to evaluate

qualitative research studies, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Houghton et al., 2013; Petty et al., 2012; Wisdom, Cavaleri, Onwuegbuzie, & Green, 2012). A study has reliability when another researcher that works with the same data develops the same results (Ali & Yusof, 2012; Stewart, 2012; Tufford & Newman, 2012). Houghton et al. (2013) posited that in case study research, completeness of data is gathering multiple viewpoints from various sources to convey a complete picture as close as possible to the phenomena or problem. The multiple approaches to gathering data in a case study have advantages that maximize the potential for in-depth insight and completeness into the case (Houghton et al., 2013).

Researchers use member checking to increase the dependability of their study by ensuring that their biases do not mix with facts (Kolb, 2012; Reilly, 2013; Shavers & Moore, 2014). I addressed dependability through member checking. Member checking is taking responses back to participants for confirmation (Harper & Cole, 2012; Harvey, 2015; Reilly, 2013). Member checking allows the participants to acknowledge and respond to their words (Harvey, 2015; Houghton et al., 2013; Reilly, 2013), which confirms the dependability of the instrument tool by confirming its ability to measure a consistent characteristic of all relevant content related to the overarching research question of a research study (Alumran, Hou, & Hurst, 2012; Harper & Cole, 2012; Petty et al., 2012).

Validity

Credibility, transferability, and confirmability are part of the research validation framework (Cope, 2014; Elo et al., 2014; Danque, 2014). To establish credibility, I

reviewed documents looking for similarities within and across study participants, as suggested by several researchers (Danque, 2014; Petty et al., 2012; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). When only one researcher analyzes the data, the reliability of the analysis depends on the inclusiveness and representativeness of the data as a whole (Chiliya et al., 2011; Elo et al., 2014; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Reading transcribed interviews thoroughly can help establish credibility (Cope, 2014; Danque et al., 2014; Noble & Smith, 2011). Once I transcribed each participant's interview, I read each for accuracy.

Once researchers confirm content validity through multiple methods, they can conclude that sufficient information exists (Magasi et al., 2012; Stewart, 2012; Venkatesh et al., 2012). I minimized the threat of validity through methodological triangulation. Methodological triangulation involves using different source of information to increase the validity of a study (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012; Franco et al., 2014; Houghton et al., 2013). I used the case study research design to collect and analyze a variety of data from different viewpoints to answer the overarching research question of this study, as recommended by several researchers (Petty et al., 2012, Stake, 2013; Wynn & Williams, 2012).

Transferability occurs when thick descriptions from findings have applicability to other areas and future research (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012; Houghton et al., 2013; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). To increase the transferability of my study, I aspired to provide the world with high-quality results by choosing appropriate study participants, providing detailed-oriented demographics information, performing extensive data analysis and presenting results in an organized format. Confirmability takes place when

credibility, transferability, and dependability are established (Houghton et al., 2013; Petty et al., 2012; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

Researchers achieve confirmability when readers of their research gain a sense of trust in the reliability of findings and the applicability of the study (Houghton et al., 2013; Petty et al., 2012; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). I continued to collect and analyze data until I reached the data saturation point. Data saturation is the point where additional data collection and analysis can no longer provide any new meaningful information (Danque et al., 2014; Kolb, 2012; Marshall et al., 2013). I achieved data saturation when consistent themes overlapped.

Transition and Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore marketing strategies leaders of small traditional travel agencies have used to obtain and retain customers successfully. Section 2 included a concise statement of the purpose of the study, the role of the researcher, the participants of the study, and the research method and design. In addition, Section 2 included other sections, including population and sampling, ethical research, data collection instruments, data collection technique, data organization techniques, data analysis, reliability and validity, and transition and summary. In Section 3, I will present the findings and their application to professional practice. I will also discuss the implications for social change, recommendations for action and further research, my reflections, and conclusion.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore online marketing strategies leaders of small traditional travel agencies have used successfully to obtain and retain customers. The information I will provide in Section 3 includes the presentation of findings, applications to professional practice, and recommendations for action. In Section 3, I will also discuss recommendations for further study, reflections, and summary and study conclusions.

The data for this study came from conducting semistructured interviews with leaders of small traditional travel agencies in the state of Maryland, observations made during the interviews, and reviews of company documentation. Upon analyzing the data collected, I developed four themes that were relevant to the overarching research question. The results included online marketing strategies that leaders of small traditional travel agencies may use to compete in a technology-driven world. The findings also indicated that leaders of small traditional travel agencies use various marketing strategies to maximize profits and compete with Internet-based travel agencies and do not fully understand when they are using a form of online marketing to successfully obtain and retain customers.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question that spearheaded this study was as follows: What online marketing strategies do leaders of small traditional travel agencies use to obtain and retain customers? I generated participants through using criterion sampling,

collected data through interviewing three small traditional travel agency leaders, and then analyzed the resulting data using HyperRESEARCH. I triangulated data collected from semistructured interviews, document review, and observations using methodological triangulation. According to several researchers, methodological triangulation uses more than one method for triangulation (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012; Houghton et al., 2013; Petty, 2012). I achieved data saturation with the original number of participants because there was no new information that was consistent with previous answers, document review, and observations by the end of the third interview. I recorded; transcribed; coded, using I1 through I3; and verified interviews via member checking. Four themes emerged as a result of conducting methodological triangulation. The following four themes emerged from the data analyses phase in this study:

1. Company threats,
2. Online marketing strategies,
3. Various marketing strategies for improvement, and
4. Ways to compete with Internet-based travel agencies.

These themes were important aspects in obtaining a better understanding of online marketing strategies of small traditional travel agencies. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore online marketing strategies leaders of small traditional travel agencies have used to successfully obtain and retain customers.

Theme 1: Company Threats

Company threats are a major factor in determining the sustainability of businesses (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014). Recognizing these threats was important to the participants.

The results revealed that two of the three participants (i.e., 66%) believed that the Internet, online travel agencies (OTAs), and tour operators are threats to their businesses (see Table 1).

Table 1

Perceived Company Threats

Participants	Internet	OTAs	Tour Operators	None
I1				X
I2	X		X	
I3		X		

When I asked if her agency had any company threats, Participant I1 replied, “I don’t believe any. None.” When I asked if her agency had any company threats, Participant I2 replied, “I guess the Internet and the tour operators now. You can deal directly with them and the cruise lines. So, those are some of the challenges.” When I asked if her agency had any company threats, Participant I3 replied, “Definitely the online travel agencies. You have your Expedia, your Orbitz, your cheap Caribbean. So, those do kind of take away from our business.”

When I asked the question related to company threats, I was looking for a nonverbal cue that supported work from other researchers that the Internet and OTAs were a threat to small traditional travel agencies. Participants I2 and I3 widened their eyes and straightened their posture and stated the Internet and OTAs. These nonverbal cues meant the participants were possibly scared and that the Internet and OTAs were definitely company threats, which matched participants’ responses.

I reviewed the works of other scholars that confirmed the Internet and OTAs as threats to small traditional travel agencies. For example, Del Chaippa (2013) argued that

since the inception of the Internet, the role of traditional travel agencies became questionable. A sample of 2,508 Americans showed that 56% of participants considered OTAs useful and essential in their travel planning (Del Chiappa, Alarcón-Del-Amo, & Lorenzo-Romero, 2016). In addition, Tsiotsou and Ratten (2010) argued that the Internet has changed the layout of the travel distribution process, which has resulted in travel agencies' lower business performance. Lawton and Weaver's (2009) study revealed that negative public perceptions of travel agencies were a common theme that included the role of the Internet.

Disruptive innovations grow to capture a large share of the established market and improve to deliver performance that is *good enough* and attracts the attention of both existing and new customers embracing this innovation (Charitou & Markides, 2012). An example of this process within the travel industry is the rise of OTAs, such as Expedia, Travelocity, and Orbitz (Guttentag, 2015). Researchers' views on the effect the Internet and OTAs have on diminishing small traditional travel agencies, along with participants' straightened posture, widened eyes, and responses through cross-verification confirmed that the Internet and OTAs are threats to small traditional travel agencies.

Theme 2: Online Marketing Strategies

The second theme that emerged in this study was online marketing strategies. When I asked the question related to online marketing strategies used, I was looking for a facial expression or some other look that would reveal the participants' confidence with using online marketing strategies because I used criterion sampling to select the participants. All participants had a look that portrayed confidence. Participant I1

confidently stated that she used Constant Contact. Participants I2 and I3 (i.e., 66%) laughed with confidence and stated that they do not use online marketing strategies to reach and retain customers. I interpreted this laugh as a sign shown by Participants I2 and I3 that they were fine without using online marketing strategies. However, through document review, I learned that all three participants had websites (i.e., 100%; see Table 2). This contradicted Participants I2's and I3's response and their confident facial cues.

Participant I1's nonverbal cues matched her interview responses and information contained in company's documents. Participant I1 has a website with travel specials and uses Constant Contact. Participant I1 showed me an e-mail developed with Constant Contact that advertised discounted trips. The website and the use of Constant Contact are online marketing strategies to obtain and retain customers. Although Participants I2 and I3 stated that they do not use online marketing strategies to obtain and retain customers, both participants had websites and vendors for advertising trips on their websites (see Table 2). Participant I3 showed the placement of her travel agency on Apple Vacation's website. I also observed Apple Vacation's placement on Participant I2's website. These observations confirmed the use of online marketing and vendor promotion, which contradicted the participants' responses to the question of online marketing strategies used.

Metzger (2013) indicated that confusion remains among traditional travel agencies concerning their core products, practices, and purposes in a post-Internet era. Ching-Chiao and Ching-Fu (2012) suggested that the importance of the Internet

demonstrates the need for travel agencies to create their websites to facilitate marketing and e-commerce transactions. Each participant had a website for marketing.

Table 2

Online Marketing Strategies Used

Participants	Website	Constant Contact	Vendor
I1	X	X	
I2	X		X
I3	X		X

When I asked what online marketing strategies her agency uses, Participant I2 replied, “We've never done that. And we never had to do that. None. We have a lady who puts up our website. Then...umm..when we have Apple Vacations they include us for a fee and all the advertisement with on the Internet or in the paper.” When I asked what online marketing strategies her agency uses, Participant I3 answered:

We don't (laugh), so we don't know...umm there's a lot of stuff that goes in the thought of how we market and what we market. We don't (laugh). We haven't really. Umm..we have our website. We are listed...for example with Apple Vacations, with umm Sandals, with Funjet. We are listed when you go to their site when it says find a travel agent...we're listed and we're usually listed in one of the first couple of ones because of our certifications...but we really...as far as like...umm..advertising online, we don't...we don't.

When I asked what online marketing strategies her agency uses, Participant I1 replied, “I have my website, and I use Constant Contact. That would be Constant Contact.

Sixty-six percent (i.e., 2 out of 3) of participants stated that Internet strategies have not been successful in attaining and retaining customers (see Table 3).

Table 3

Successful Internet Strategies

Participants	Yes	No
I1		X
I2	X	
I3		X

When I asked have Internet strategies been successful, Participant I1 responded, “No. People just visit the website just for pricing.” When I asked have Internet strategies been successful, Participant I2 replied, “Yes. Yes. Well, once a client comes to us through the Internet, or through the school Internet, ...umm... then we usually set-up an appointment if they're in town to talk them. If not, they're from California, Egypt or someplace like that for the school, umm then we just do everything on the Internet.”

When I asked have Internet strategies been successful, Participant I3 answered:

I would say probably not and it is because of the fact.... we don't use the Internet to our advantage. A lot of it comes from the time it takes to spend building the website doing mass emails. We do have our consortium which is Vacation.com. They do mass mailings from our mailing lists maybe once a month. We just okay it... they'll send us an email. We hit okay, and they send it out. We don't get much business from that...umm.

The significance of online marketing is currently increasing (Nuseir, 2016).

Successful innovation is vital to maintaining and growing customer and product markets

(Baker & Sinkula, 2009; Nuseir, 2016). A study conducted by Nuseir (2016) revealed that the Internet is a useful online marketing tool. Nuseir found that 72% of participants believe that products and services purchased online are more reliable and satisfactory. Nuseir also found that Internet marketing strategies increase brand loyalty and retain existing and new customers.

When I asked the question about additional information related to online marketing strategies, I was looking for responses that could foster different approaches to online marketing. Instead, all participants showed a look of slight disappointment with their shoulders down. This nonverbal cue revealed disappointment in their online marketing deficiencies, along with their responses, and did not offer any additional insight to online marketing strategies. Participant I1 replied, “None other than web search to get to the top of the list. I don’t understand how that works.” Participant I2 stated, “But I do have a social media person who wants to come in and sort of take us to the next step.” Participant I3 answered:

The fact is we just don't use...we don't do online marketing. We should. We reach out to our clients..umm... sometimes we'll do..it's been a long time..we'll do like a mass email, but we just...We don't have to...unfortunate. We don't use stuff to our advantage like we probably should. Probably bring in more business, but I don't think it's important enough to us, and this probably sounds really bad.

Cronin-Gilmore (2012) revealed that although owners had business proficiency, they thought their marketing abilities were lacking or missing because they did not comprehend the importance of marketing.

Christensen (1997) described how companies may falter not by falling behind the pace of advancement or ignoring core consumers, but by ignoring the rising advancement of a disruptive product that lacks in traditional methods and offers alternative benefits (Guttentag, 2015). Leaders are the core component to having marketing knowledge. However, through cross-verification interview responses with document review and nonverbal cues, I concluded that participants lacked online marketing knowledge.

Theme 3: Various Marketing Strategies for Improvement

The third theme that emerged from my analyses of data collected was the improvement of marketing strategies. Participant I1's nonverbal cues showed amusement when she stated that she used telephone calling, Constant Contact, and Google Adwords as marketing strategies for improvement. I reviewed Participant I1's Constant Contact e-mail campaign and the Google Adwords she used for search engine optimization (SEO). I was trying to determine if these documents supported this study's overarching research question: What online marketing strategies do leaders of small traditional travel agencies use to obtain and retain customers? My conclusion was that these documents did support the overall research question. Constant Contact is an online e-mail campaign and Google AdWords is online advertising. Participants I2 and I3 exhibited nonverbal cues revealing their eagerness to demonstrate the marketing strategies they used for improvement. Participant I3 used vendor promotion, such as Apple Vacations. Participant I3 pointed to Apple Vacations advertised on her website. I wanted to verify if vendor promotion supported this study's research question. Through cross-analysis of the responses by

Participants I1 and I3, observations, and review of documentation, I confirmed that Constant Contact and Google AdWords for SEO supported this study's research question.

Participant I2 excitedly pulled out business cards that she used at public events. When I reviewed Participant I2's business card, I was looking for information on the business card that would connect to online marketing and this study's overarching research question. I noticed that the company's website was missing. However, there was an e-mail address and a phone number. Through cross-analysis with Participant I2's responses, her eager nonverbal cue, and information found on business card, did not confirm various marketing strategies for improvement or supported this study's overarching research question.

Two major goals of marketing are to obtain new customers by promising and providing superior value and retain and grow current customers by delivering a product or service that translates into customer satisfaction (Ekankumo, 2012). Yassine et al. (2012) argued that travel agents have to use more aggressive marketing techniques to influence demand. Results show that participants used various marketing strategies for improvement. Sixty-six percent of participants used a form of online marketing for improvement (see Table 4).

Table 4

Various Marketing Strategies Used for Improvement

Participants	Vendor Promotion	Out in Public	Constant Contact	Telephone Calls	SEO
I1			X	X	X
I2		X			
I3	X				

Promotion is a critical factor for businesses in the service marketing mix (Hossain Sarker et al., 2012). Holjevac and Basan (2009) suggested that travel agency leaders should have a good promotion that increases the profitability and reputation of the travel agency. Mansor et al. (2011) stated that advertising is the most relevant tool in any marketing activities that uses several methods to attract attention, arouse interest, convey information, and induce the traveler. Because of service industries, such as tourism, are continuously under pressure to grow their customer base, they need to make devoted efforts in luring customers (Pawaskar & Goel, 2016). All participants (i.e., 100%) had no strategic online marketing plan.

Christensen (1997) argued that existing providers exist in an established system that constrains their ability to introduce disruptive technologies, products, and business models (Gigliero et al., 2011). TDT is a theory of competitive response in that disruption is a process, and innovations can only be disruptive in relation to something else (Denning, 2016). While leaders of these small traditional travel agencies used prior and existing strategies to establish their agencies, they rarely implemented disruption technologies.

Theme 4: Ways to Compete with Internet-Based Travel Agencies

Ways to compete with OTAs was the fourth theme. When I asked the question about ways to compete with OTAs, all participants (i.e., 100%) gave daunting smiles and wide eyes and stated that customer loyalty is a way to compete with OTAs. This nonverbal cue, along with responses, meant customer loyalty and satisfaction are important. Participants I1 and I3 showed two hard copies of competitors' OTAs trip

specials that two loyal customers had brought. Two out of three (i.e., 66%) participants stated that *price matching* and *years in business* helped to compete with Internet-only travel providers. Participants I1 and I3 showed their match pricing they had conducted to compete with other vendors' prices. I was looking for exact price matching or lower prices to compete and to support customer loyalty. I found that Participants I1 and I3 matched their competitors pricing. Participant I2 showed an award for many years in business. I looked for the number of years in business. In addition, I observed the number of years in business in the *About Us* section of Participant I2's website. Participant I2 was in business for 44 years. Participant I3 pointed to an award plaque on the wall for excellent customer service. I looked for a numerical value for excellent customer service. Participant I3 received an award for excellent customer service delivered for three years in a row. Through cross-verification of responses, observations, and document review, I confirmed that all participants used customer loyalty, price matching, and number of years in business to compete with Internet-based travel agencies.

The conceptual understanding of the role of marketing has enhanced by allowing businesses to create and sustain a competitive advantage (Morgan, 2012). Marketing and innovative capabilities have an influence on business performance and competitive advantage (Lew & Sinkovics, 2013). O'Donnell (2011) posited that the literature presents core-marketing activities for small businesses, and one of them is gathering information about competitors. Through observation, document review, and participants' responses, participants used various strategies to compete with Internet-based travel agencies (see Table 5).

Table 5

Strategies to Compete with Competitors

Participants	Price Match	Customer Loyalty	Years in Business	Constant Contact
I1	X	X		X
I2		X	X	
I3	X	X	X	

The customer has a central role in shaping the success of a business (Bahrami, Ghorbani, & Arabzad, 2012; Osborne & Ballantyne, 2012). One of Lamberti and Noci's (2010) marketing strategic groups in their case study was RMCs. RMCs are more relationship oriented and focused on establishing long-term relationships with customers. RM enhances competitive advantage by increasing repeated patronage (Dewani, Sinha, & Mathur, 2016). Leaders of OTAs cannot match the personalized service of a traditional brick-and-mortar travel agency (Guttentag, 2015). Traditional travel agents provide counseling to consumers, which is an important feature that leaders of OTAs cannot provide (Peng et al., 2013; Turgay et al., 2013).

When I asked how does her agency compete with OTAs, Participant I2 replied, "Most people like coming to an agency to see a live person to discuss everything. We've been around for 44 years. So, we have a huge clientele" When I asked how does her agency compete with OTAs, Participant I3 answered:

Our biggest thing is of keeping our clients is on a personal level reaching out. We've been around so long, and people know us. Match prices. We do. If somebody comes in with a price they found with like cheap Caribbean or...umm..for example Expedia or Orbitz, we can match it apples for apples.

When I asked how does her agency compete with OTAs, Participant I1 responded, “I use tour operators and wholesalers for price matching to match the price. A lot of business comes from customer referrals.”

Small businesses, with close customer relationships, have higher customer loyalty and levels of customer satisfaction (Chao & Spillan, 2013; Taghipoor, 2013). However, there are some adversities with close customer relationships. Atuahene-Gima (2005) revealed that customer orientation adversely influences a business’ essential innovation. In addition, Christensen (1997) argued that businesses that are very close to current customers focus heavily on fulfilling these customers’ needs and may fail to catch new trends and technologies (Eggers et al., 2013; Hillebrand et al., 2011). Eggers et al. (2013) argued that this might lead to company failure and that businesses often fail because of their preoccupation with customers, as opposed to creating discontinuous change. Because of this failure, the findings indicated a minimal usage of new trends and technology. Holjevac and Basan (2009) argued that travel agency leaders should stay up-to-date of market trends.

Customers can select the lowest in the travel industry (Hossain Sarker et al., 2012). As a result, workers and managers of travel companies must offer their customers low prices (Butnaru & Bordeianu, 2012). Christensen (1997) argued that TDT allows individuals to make products cheaper and easier to use (Lewis, 2012). The existing literature reviewed contains several instances in which authors claimed that marketing is an integral factor in the performance of a business. Connect-marketing with business performance has become more urgent and, over the years, the role of marketing has been

improved by allowing businesses to create and sustain a competitive advantage (Morgan, 2012). With marketing, the customer plays a central role in shaping the success of a business (Bahrami, Ghorbani, & Arabzad, 2012; Osborne & Ballantyne, 2012).

Managers use market knowledge to reveal current deficiencies in the organization and the emerging market opportunities that may be critical in the development of new capabilities (Atuahene-Gima, 2005). Several researchers (Chan et al., 2010; Hillebrand et al., 2011; Holjevac & Basan, 2009) argued that business leaders should (a) have presence on the market continuously, (b) stay up-to-date of market trends, (c) adjust offerings to demand, (d) be a leader in the marketplace, (e) have good promotion that increases the profitability and reputation of the travel agency, (f) place more emphasis on customer attainment and retention primarily through marketing functions and product development, and (g) monitor future customers and market developments. Through data analyses, none of the participants in this study possessed all of these qualities.

This study's findings revealed that small traditional travel agencies that have been in business for many years have established a loyal customer-base and neither expand their marketing knowledge and practices nor keep up with trends and technology. Most of these small traditional travel agency leaders use online marketing strategies to attain and retain customers but do not understand how to effectively use online marketing to attain and retain customers. Leaders of small traditional travel agencies experience slow performance levels because they have not taken advantage of technological innovations (Abou-Shouk et al., 2013). In a study conducted by Nuseir (2016), 70% of business owners used online marketing for promoting and marketing their products or services.

Applications to Professional Practice

The specific business problem was that some leaders of small traditional travel agencies lack online marketing strategies used to obtain and retain customers successfully. The objective of this study was to explore online marketing strategies leaders of small traditional travel agencies have used to successfully obtain and retain customers successfully. Majumdar and Kishore (2012) argued that the lack of marketing expertise and practice could hinder small business success. Sixty-six percent of the participants stated that Internet marketing strategies have not been successful in obtaining and retaining customers. However, from the findings, all participants lacked efficient marketing knowledge. Jain (2013) argued that in a post-dot-com world, marketing managers are obtaining the knowledge to cope with a host of new marketing features that have emerged from the Internet. Understanding aspects of marketing and current trends may help leaders of small traditional travel agencies and other individuals to improve their practice and performance.

Sixty-six percent of the participants stated that the Internet and OTAs are threats to their businesses. However, all participants indicated that customer loyalty is a way to compete with others in the same industry. In addition, most participants stated that price matching and the number of years in business help them to compete with others in the same industry. One conclusion I made was that there were no strategic marketing plans for most participants and that all the participants lacked marketing knowledge.

Christensen's (1997) TDT also supports these findings. When established businesses face disruptive innovations, these businesses almost always fail to adapt and are often forced

out of business (Lewis, 2012). Participants I2 and I3 stated that they do not use online marketing strategies to reach customers. In this study, I found that participants used online vendors and websites as online marketing strategies to obtain and retain customers.

The traditional travel agency is a sector with high business mortality (Bagur-Femenías et al., 2015). Leaders of small traditional travel agencies may hire a marketing consultant to help them design a strategic plan. The online strategies implemented by the participants were: (a) websites, (b) Constant Contact, and (c) Apple Vacations. Because the Internet has improved the efficiency of marketing efforts to customers reducing the role of traditional travel agencies (Del Chiappa, 2013), the rapid progress in IT provides businesses with more capabilities and a competitive advantage (Bahrami et al., 2012). Leaders of small traditional travel agencies can adopt some of these strategies and include them in their strategic marketing plan.

Some of the participants improved marketing from using traditional strategies. Hulbert et al. (2013) suggested that traditional marketing methods that are logical, efficient, and require large budgets should be adapted to fit small businesses that depend on the expertise of the owner or manager with a small operating budget. Participant I1 stated that telephone calls improved marketing within the company. Participant I2 attends various public events with business cards.

Also, all participants shared that they use customer loyalty as a strategy to compete with OTAs. Participant I2 stated that most people like coming to an agency to see a live person to discuss everything. Participant I1 indicated that most of the business

comes from customer referrals. Participated I3 stated that her goal is to keep their clients on a personal level and reach out to them. Christensen's (1997) TDT shows that businesses that are very close to, and dependent on, current customers focus heavily on fulfilling these customers' needs and may fail to catch new trends and technologies (Eggers et al., 2013; Hillebrand et al., 2011).

The results of this study contribute to the existing body of literature on the importance of marketing strategies to small businesses, such as traditional travel agencies. Small businesses are the backbone of the U.S. economy (Cole, 2013; Haltiwanger et al., 2013; Prasad et al., 2012); as a result, small businesses' health is vital to economic growth because of the production and creation of jobs (Cole, 2013). This study may give leaders insights on marketing practices for small businesses to ensure their continued success.

Implications for Social Change

Small businesses are an essential part of the economy in which they provide jobs (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012). Small businesses represent over 98% of all companies in the United States (Ngozi, 2012) and are responsible for 65% of net job creation in local communities in the United States (Allen, Ericksen, & Collins, 2013; Prasad et al., 2012). Small business mortality can result in an economic downturn in the United States. The significance of this study is that leaders of small traditional travel agencies reported that they do not use online marketing strategies to obtain and retain customers successfully in an Internet market. Leaders of small traditional travel agencies need to enhance the marketing performance of their businesses to attain customers (Prasad et al., 2012). In

addition, Abou-Shouk et al. (2013) revealed that small traditional travel agencies' performance is slow partially because they have not taken advantage of technological innovations. During the analyses of the data, I found that all participants used some form of online marketing strategies but did not fully take advantage of online marketing strategies. Sixty-six percent of participants stated that Internet strategies were not successful and that they used their experience to compete with others in the same industry. These leaders need to focus on ways to take advantage of technological innovations by using online marketing strategies more effectively.

These findings may assist leaders of small traditional travel agencies in producing social change by implementing online marketing strategies consistently. If these leaders take advantage and focus on disruptive innovations, local employment can improve, employee spending, and increased sales that may help improve business performance, revenue, and economic growth in the United States. The significance of the contributions of small businesses to production makes small businesses the basis for economic growth (Cole, 2013). If leaders of small traditional travel agencies acknowledge disruption innovations, there may be increased knowledge of leaders of small traditional travel agencies to compete with Internet-based travel agencies and increase access to information and social interactions for those isolated due to lack of knowledge and/or physical challenged/home bound.

Bagur-Femenías et al. (2015) argued that the travel agency is a sector with high business mortality. Because these businesses had a disruption in their established way of operating, these findings may help leaders with their business structure and performance.

I sought to bring social change by providing leaders of small traditional travel agencies knowledge related to online marketing strategies, which may allow them to grow personally and professionally. The contributions to social change this study offers are the result of strategies small traditional travel agencies can consider to support business growth. Such strategies include price matching, SEO, and vendor promotion.

Recommendations for Action

These findings can help small traditional travel agency leaders develop and implement a strategic marketing plan and provide local employment in the community. The lack of marketing knowledge may have a major impact on businesses. Businesses can fail, and employees can lose their jobs. It may be beneficial for leaders of small traditional travel agencies to undergo training in the effective use of online marketing strategies for the travel industry. Training may alleviate the lack of knowledge and improve marketing efforts (Kiran et al., 2012). Based on participants' responses in this study, I found that it is important for small businesses to have, and be knowledgeable about effective marketing strategies. The results may provide insight to existing and future small traditional travel agencies. I recommend that small business leaders use the findings from this study to improve their business performance, which can have a positive result on the small traditional travel agencies and the U.S. economy.

Other leaders, in general, and small business leaders, in particular, may find these results beneficial as well. These results may also lead to improved business performance, and it can provide local employment and employee spending. I can disseminate these findings to academic and professional conferences, academic journals, businesses,

professional developments, publications, and trainings. Small traditional travel agencies will benefit the most from this study. However, the study can apply to numerous business leaders.

Recommendations for Further Study

The case study research design has several limitations and, as a result, I have several recommendations for further study. There is a need to conduct more studies with more small traditional travel agencies in other geographical areas in the United States. The specific population of this study only consisted of leaders of small traditional travel agencies, located in the state of Maryland. Other recommendations for future research include that more researchers conduct studies on the marketing knowledge of business leaders if cost may hinder hiring a marketing consultant, and marketing strategies of small traditional travel agencies versus large traditional travel agencies. Sixty-six percent of the participants stated that they did not use online marketing strategies. However, results indicated that they do use a few online marketing strategies. These studies may provide leaders with insights on improving business performance through the use and understanding of online marketing strategies.

Reflections

The purpose of this study was to explore online marketing strategies leaders of small traditional travel agencies have used to successfully obtain and retain customers. The doctoral process was a lengthy process. However, the research process provided astute information. Data collection allowed me to comprehensively observe a real-life situation in-depth. The participants were receptive to allow a stranger come into their

business establishments, know their business, and show what they do. Before the data collection process, there were possible personal biases because I had extensive experience with OTAs. These biases could have had effects on the study. However, after the data collection process ended, I changed my thought process, as I witnessed the willingness of these leaders to open their doors and businesses to me.

Conclusion

The service sector accounts for 70% or more of the GDP the United States (Kindström & Kowalkowski, 2014; Thakur & Hale, 2013). The travel division is an integral aspect of the traveling business. Travel has become an important sector of the service industry (Sadeghein, Khoshalhan, & Homayoun, 2012). The traditional travel agency is a sector with high business mortality (Bagur-Femenías, Perramon, & Amat, 2015). The purpose of this multicase qualitative case study was to explore online marketing strategies leaders of small traditional travel agencies have used to successfully obtain and retain customers.

I found that the general business problem was that some leaders of small traditional travel agencies are unable to maximize profits because many customers are booking online outside of small traditional travel agencies. I also discovered that the specific business problem was that some leaders of small traditional travel agencies lack online marketing strategies used to successfully obtain and retain customers. The results support the conceptual framework, Christensen's (1997) TDT, in which a disruptive product transformed a market in which established businesses fail to catch or implement new trends and technologies. I found that these businesses fail to catch or implement new

trends and technologies because owners or managers do not possess sufficient knowledge but feel that the Internet and OTAs are threats to their businesses. Leaders of small traditional travel agencies may need support and guidance in a world of technology disruption.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

The interview coding protocol was as follows:

The researcher used the following code of the letter (I) and a number (1–3). The letter “I” will represent the participant, and the numbers 1–3 will represent the specific participant.

The interview process was as follows:

Introduction

- Thank the participant for taking part in the interview.
- Remind participant of the main research question of the study: What online marketing strategies do leaders of small traditional travel agencies use to obtain and retain customers?

Informed Consent

- Review consent form with participant.
- Answer any questions the participant may have regarding the consent form.
- Ask participant to sign consent form.

Interview Questions

- Ask the participant the interview questions.
- Listen and take notes.

Interview Wrap-up

- Remind the participant the interview will remain confidential.
- Tell participant that a transcript of the interview will be given to confirm accuracy.

- Inform the participant that he/she may contact the researcher or Walden University's IRB with any questions or concerns.
- Thank the participant for his/her time.

Appendix B: Document Review Protocol

Chart used to conduct document review for each business establishment.

Document	How does it impact the study?	Location/Evidence

Appendix C: Observation Protocol

Chart used to document observations made during the interviews.

Participant Being Observed	
Visual Details	
Facial Cues	
Body Language	