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Visitor Center Staff Training: A U.S Assessment

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Abstract

As the first step toward developing benchmarks for travel counselor training, the authors identify the methods and characteristics of existing travel counselor-training programs in the U.S. Responses from 30 out of 50 state tourism agencies indicate that 12 different methods of training are emplyed; however, usage and satisfaction with these various training methods vary.

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by Randall S. Upchurch
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According to Nickerson,
state and provincial
tourism offices are spend-
ing millions of dollars to promote
their entire state/province.[1] Hence,
it is a foregone conclusion that
state tourism offices perceive the
visitor center as being a very
robust "point of interception" for
the traveler as they enter and
cross the state. In agreement with
this notion is the research con-
ducted by Ritchie and Goeldner
who found "that next to media
advertising, the operation of inter-
state visitor information centers
(or welcome centers or visitor cen-
ters or traveler information cen-
ters) is the second highest promo-

tional expense of most state
tourism departments."[2]

In addition, Perdue noted that
states recognize the critical role of
the visitor information center in
promoting tourism within the
state.[3] Hence, there is strong evi-
dence attesting to the importance
of providing travelers with timely
and accurate information at these
visitor information centers.[4]
Therefore, given the magnitude
and depth of services offered, it is
no surprise to find that over 90
percent of these VICs are perma-
nent facilities, and almost two-
thirds are open year-round.[5]

Visitor information centers
often represent the first point of
interaction between visitors and
the state tourism industry. As
such, VICs often set the stage for
a visitor's experience within the
state.[6] Not only do they influence
the visitor's critical first impres-
sion of hospitality and service
quality, but they also provide var-
ious types of information, ranging

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from highway maps to brochures that feature attractions, accommodations, and recreational activities within the state.[7] Visitor information centers also provide the opportunity for travelers to rest and relax, and from the perspective of tourism promoters, they increasingly are recognized as an important opportunity to develop visitors' expectations and, thereby, influence travel behavior.[8]

Therefore, the primary purpose of a visitor information center is to increase tourism revenue to the state by effectively developing on-site awareness and enhancing destination choice prior to the tourist's arrival in the state.[9]

Economic impact present

Issues addressing the effectiveness of information provision strategies are of particular importance to public sector organizations involved with tourism because these organizations have historically focused on providing travel-related information to visitors and potential visitors as a strategy to increase expenditures.[10] One area in particular that drew research attention was the role of information provided by VICs in increasing tourist length of stay, as well as in generating unplanned visits. For example, Roehl and Fesenmaier indicate that information obtained from VICs may influence the places visited as well as the amount of time and money spent in a state.[11] More specifically, the information obtained by visitors at VICs influences visitor behavior on their current trip and also on

future trips. Hence, visitor information centers create a significant economic impact through incremental expenditures that they help generate.[12]

Travel counselors are vital

Certainly, visitor information centers are an important component of the promotional strategies of most state tourism organizations. And, more importantly, travel counselors employed at these visitor centers are essential to making the visitor center an informational and satisfactory experience for the traveler[13] by helping the tourist develop an immediate impression about the state's services and destinations as a direct result of this traveler/counselor interaction.

Clearly, requiring staff to be knowledgeable about tourist-related information assumes that active training sessions occur upon hiring or throughout the travel counselor's duration of employment. Therefore, the role of travel counselor is that of a "host" or "ambassador" to the community by being the on-site expert concerning products, attractions, sites and services.[14] More specifically, visitor information centers depend on travel counselors' hospitality and information skills to be motivated and committed to the service of furnishing visitors with an understanding of tourist amenities and attractions available within the area.[15] In support of these views, Tierney and Hass indicate that visitor welcome centers must have easy access, clear

Table 1

Travel counselors in VICs during each season

No. of travel counselors	Spring no.	Spring %	Summer no.	Summer %	Fall no.	Fall %	Winter no.	Winter %
1-3	16	59.3	10	37.0	12	44.4	17	65.4
4-6	11	40.7	15	55.6	15	55.6	9	34.6
7-9	0	0	1	3.7	0	0	0	0
More than 10	0	0	1	3.7	0	0	0	0
Total	27	100	27	100	27	100	26	100

signage, adequate room for movement and displays, and, perhaps most importantly, trained staff.[16]

Moreover, the importance of training a visitor center "ambassador" cannot be overstated in terms of developing a positive image of state services and destinations. With this level of importance in mind, it is only logical to assume that training plays a key role in the development and refinement of the travel counselor's ability to be friendly, helpful, and, more important, effective in the delivery of clear and comprehensive travel information to the tourist.

Study profiles training

The primary purpose of this study was to profile the content areas of travel counselor training and training delivery approaches used at each location, and to determine the level of satisfaction with existing training delivery approaches used at visitor information centers in the U.S.

In each state the government agency responsible for tourism was contacted and the individual responsible for visitor information centers identified. The basic prerequisite was that this individual had to be responsible for and knowledgeable of the state's travel counselor training program. One individual for each state, although each held a different position, was selected to be among the subjects for the research study.

The questionnaire was developed under the advisement of the director of the visitor information center in Hudson, Wisconsin, in an effort to provide questionnaire items that were germane to travel counselor training. This process resulted in a questionnaire that asked the respondent to rate the "usage and satisfaction" of 12 different training methods on a scale of 1 to 5 and to project their usage of these same 12 training methods in future travel counselor training programs.

Out of the 30 respondents, 15 had fewer than five years of industry experience, eight had six to 10 years, and seven had more than 11. It should be noted that the New England region was not strongly represented in this sample.

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Table 2
Content covered during training sessions

Content	Frequency	
	#	percent
1. Destination areas	22	100.0
2. Cities/ facilities	17	77.3
3. Events of interest	21	95.5
4. Road condition	13	59.1
5. Give directions to travelers	16	72.7
6. Map reading	16	72.7
7. Being a good ambassador	18	81.8
8. Dealing with emergency situations	16	72.7
9. Communication skills	19	86.4
10. Brochure familiarization	18	81.8
11. Approval of literature	15	68.2
12. Community culture	15	68.2
13. Community history	16	72.7
14. Workplace safety	15	68.2
15. Others	11	50.0

The number of travel counselors employed in each VIC varies with the seasons. One state hires 7 to 9 and another more than 10; however, the majority (55.6 percent) (n=15) of states hire 4 to 6. Seasonal conditions play an important role in the number of travel counselors in each VIC. In winter, nine states (34.6 percent) employ 4 to 6 travel counselors, but most (65.4 percent) hire 1 to 3. The number of travel counselors remains relatively stable across the seasons.

Training is diverse

Eight states (26.7 percent) don't provide any form of a standardized training program. Almost all (n=20) conduct travel counselor training sessions annually, while only one reports monthly training. Bulk hiring occurs in order to satisfy the increased information demands before the peak tourist season begins and this influx is characterized by an intensive orientation session. The average length of each travel counselor training per session varied as follows: 1-3 hours (n=5), 4-6 hours (n=1), 7-9 hours (n=8), and 10 or more hours (n=7), with 7 to 9 hours as the most prevalent. Clearly, this initial orientation training session is a time intensive process and covers an extensive list of subjects (See Table 2).

It is worthy to mention that there were additional elements of

travel counselor training that the questionnaire did not capture. For instance, 11 respondents made notations that topics such as department policies and procedures, hours of operation, mail delivery, state geographical features, state policies, sex discrimination, computer training, use of on-site software, introduction to department staff and their functions, coordination with state agencies and resources, Internet use, and satellite weather service are critical pieces of their travel counselor training programs. These areas can be categorized into two sections: first, training focuses on knowledge and awareness of state destinations and resources; and, second, travel counselor training develops an individual's skills and knowledge of the visitor center organization. Travel counselor training is broad and encompasses cognitive, affective, and psychomotor learning domains.

Wheelhouse indicates that evaluation of an existing training program is a key portion to maintaining the integrity of an organization's training program.[17] Evaluation can be done in many forms, but the important part is that a structured evaluation should take place in close proximity to when the training occurred. In essence, trainees should receive constructive feedback relative to their progress to heighten level of performance and efficiency in performing assigned tasks; therefore, evaluation procedures were assessed.

As to the frequency of training sessions, 14.8 percent were monthly, and 85.2 percent were annual. However, only 40.9 percent evaluate their travel counselor training programs. Those that do engage in a formative evaluation process; 11.1 percent provide semi-annual evaluations; 66.7 percent provide annual assessments, and 22.2 percent provide some other means of program follow-up. Clearly, this data raises the question as to how effective existing training programs are for those that did not enter into any form of objective training session evaluation.

Observation is preferred

The preferred mode of evaluation is direct observation (55.6 percent). It is assumed that this feedback is done in close proximity to the observed behavior; however, the survey did not assess this portion. The second and third preferred methods of assessment are by questionnaire (22.2 percent) after the entire training session is completed, or by a personal interview at the completion of the training modules (22.2 percent). Given the small number of travel counselors going through training at any one time, it is not unusual to find that direct observation was the preferred method of assessment.

An interesting profile materialized when respondents were challenged to rate "usage versus satisfaction" with the 12 training methods. In essence, Table 3 should be viewed from a "gap analysis" per-

Methods	Currently used Mean	s.d.	Currently used Mean	s.d.	Satisfaction Mean	s.d.	r
1. Lecture	3.52	1.40	3.52	1.40	4.17	0.62	0.280
2. Manuals	3.48	1.40	3.48	1.40	4.11	0.68	0.101
3. On-the job-training	4.55	0.69	4.55	0.69	4.48	0.75	0.353
4. Videos	2.95	1.27	2.95	1.27	3.93	1.16	0.648
5. Cassette & recording	1.53	1.02	1.53	1.02	3.33	1.50	0.503
6. Conference	2.86	1.39	2.86	1.39	4.25	0.68	-0.23
7. Role playing / Games	2.50	1.10	2.50	1.10	3.92	0.79	0.538
8. Mentoring	2.89	1.75	2.89	1.75	4.33	0.65	0.383
9. CD-Rom training	1.06	0.24	1.06	0.24	4.00	1.41	-1.0
10. Internet information	1.65	1.11	1.65	1.11	4.00	0.63	-0.541
11. Interactive multimedia	1.79	1.40	1.79	1.40	4.00	0.89	0.000
12. Familiarization tour	3.82	1.22	3.82	1.22	4.45	1.06	0.510

spective. For instance, one assumption is that if a training method has a high level of usage, then there should be a corresponding high level of satisfaction with this method of training. If this is not the case, then a gap exists that must be scrutinized very closely to determine why the gap exists. Therefore, the purpose of the correlation procedure was to check the congruence of "usage versus satisfaction" with the employed training method.

Traditional methods preferred

When the respondent's satisfaction ratings for the 12 training methods is ranked, a pattern of satisfaction develops that is strongly skewed toward traditional delivery methods. The most preferred training method is on-the-job training (m=4.48,s.d.=0.75) followed by familiarization tours, mentoring, conference, lecture, and manuals (See Table 3). Given these ratings, one would assume that future efforts will largely consist of these training delivery methods. However, CD-ROM training, Internet information, and interactive multimedia

Table 4
Projected training methods

Methods	Mean	s.d
Lecture	2.04	0.64
Manuals	2.00	0.72
On-the job-training	2.44	0.51
Videos	2.38	0.65
Cassette & recording	1.75	0.55
Conference	2.32	0.56
Role Playing / Games	2.19	0.40
Monitoring	2.18	0.39
CD-Rom Training	2.48	0.60
Internet on-line information	2.64	0.49
Interactive multimedia	2.52	0.51
Familiarization tour	2.38	0.50

Note: 1= decrease; 2=remain same; 3=increase

received a mean score of 4.0 on a five-point scale. Even though these methods are not used to the same degree as the more traditional forms of training, there does appear to be a very high level of satisfaction with these forms of delivery. This suggests that training is a blend of personal contact (i.e., traditional forms) and technology (i.e., Internet, CD-ROM, Interactive multimedia, and video).

Again, given the diversity of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skills that encompass the travel counselor's daily regimen, it is not a surprise to find that multiple training methods are utilized. It is also not surprising to find that there is low to moderate agreement between the methods presently used and satisfaction with these training methods. The

interpretation of this finding is challenging because the instrument as designed did not determine if each training method was formally evaluated for its effectiveness and efficiency. Therefore, the correlation procedure and the standard deviations at present suggest that satisfaction levels are an inflated assessment of the training methods employed.

Future is challenge

Perhaps the biggest challenge for respondents was to project the design of travel counselor training in the future (See Table 4). At the top of the list is an increase in usage of Internet information (m=2.64). This projected desire to incorporate technology into training session regimen is supported by elevated mean ratings for interactive multimedia (2.52) and

CD-Rom training (2.48). Conversely, traditional methods of on-the-job training (2.44), familiarization tour (2.38), and conferences (2.32) were projected to increase in usage but to a lesser degree. And at the low end of the technology spectrum, the only method that is projected to decrease was use of cassette recordings (1.75).

With the growth of interactive software and the diversity of professional development materials available on the Internet, it is not surprising to see that CD-ROM and Internet materials did surface with high mean ratings. It is only logical to assume that the use of interactive/technological methods will become a major component of travel counselor training in the future.

Areas can be improved

Placing the findings of this study in the context of training and development literature, there are obvious areas that can be improved. Since the predominant length of the travel counselor's initial orientation session ranges from seven to over 10 contact hours, and the breadth of issues presented is varied, one must ponder the effectiveness of massive information overload for the learner. Also, the range of topics covered in the training sessions represents technical and operational information as well as social and professional etiquette components. Hence, there is a challenge to group this wide variety of cognitive, affective, and psy-

chomotor skills into teachable packages that can be easily consumed by the learner. Finally, since most substantive evaluation of travel counselor training occurred on an annual basis, it may be assumed that this evaluation coincided with the termination of the travel counselor training session. However, it is imperative that the evaluation period immediately follow the training session in order to capture the current state of learner retention of concepts and skills, as well as the effectiveness of the program in transmitting the information.

The impact of travel counselors cannot be underestimated given the tremendously important role they play in image development and economic contributions to the state. Hence, it is a necessary prerequisite to engage in an evaluation process that ensures that travel counselors meet or exceed traveler expectations.

Future studies should concentrate on proper application of training steps as employed in training programs.[18] From a practitioner perspective, this type of study would benefit the organization by identifying existing weaknesses in the training program and by accentuating the strengths as evidenced in the travel counselor training program.

Also, a worthwhile study would be to evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness ratings of the various training methods employed as associated with cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skills. After each association is

determined, then ways to objectively measure performance on each element should be developed.

Before states adopt a travel counselor training program, they should benchmark the visitor information centers that provide unparalleled service to their travelers. This requires that a formalized evaluation procedure be used to benchmark the "moments of truth" as experienced by traveler.[19] Once this is accomplished, then these critical elements must be incorporated into the travel counselor training experience.

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