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Abstract

The phenomenon of at-destination search activity and decision processes utilized by visitors to a location is predominantly an academic unknown. As destinations and organizations increasingly compete for their share of the travel dollar, it is evident that more research need to be done regarding how consumers obtain information once they arrive at a destination. This study examined visitor referral recommendations provided by hotel and non-hotel "locals" in a moderately-sized community for lodging, food service, and recreational and entertainment venues.

Visitor at-destination search for travel-related services

by Robin DiPietro, Denver Severt, Paul Rompf, and Peter Ricci

The phenomenon of at-destination search activity and decision processes utilized by visitors to a location is predominantly an academic unknown. As destinations and organizations increasingly compete for their share of the travel dollar, it is evident that more research needs to be done regarding how consumers obtain information once they arrive at a destination. This study examined visitor referral recommendations provided by hotel and non-hotel "locals" in a moderately-sized community for lodging, food service, and recreational and entertainment venues.

Recommendations from the local populace play an important role in the search for venues required of the vacationing public. Such recommendations include lodging facilities, nightlife and entertainment activities, dining and food service establishments, recreation, shopping, or special events. The individuals who make such recommendations are as diverse as the population of the host community within which they make their residence.

Prior to arrival or in route to a destination, vacationers are often

likely to interact with hospitality industry employees who assist them (i.e., travel agents, flight attendants, cab drivers, etc.). As employees of the hospitality industry, these individuals may be perceived as "selling" or "advertising" and not giving a truly personal recommendation when called upon for traveler or visitor information. In contrast, a local townspeople may be perceived as unbiased and more likely to provide a sincere recommendation since he or she is not compensated by a hospitality industry employer.

This enhanced credibility of a local reference is at the heart and soul of the trustworthiness expected of a vacationer who wants to experience the local area sites and vistas. An element of this type of recommendation from a local is its sincerity and its personal nature. Vacationing individuals are less likely to respond optimistically if they feel that such locally-provided advice is unnatural, financially-driven (such as by a compensated employee), or not seen as candid and trustworthy.

Many sources available

Some consumers find the vacation destination information search interesting and worthwhile, while others may find it time-consuming and stressful. Consumers can often rely upon a multitude of sources for this information search. In today's high-tech world, consumers who request vacation information for a destination are often apt to utilize brochures, internet websites, destination marketing organizations (DMOs) such as local chambers of commerce or convention and visitors bureaus, or travel agents. The employees of such organizations may provide accurate information to vacationers or they may simply promote their members or other paid advertisers. The perception is that they are not as likely to offer a gratuitous referral as suggested by Rompf.¹ As defined by Rompf, instances where an individual provides information to a traveler and the individual providing such referral is not perceived to be compensated in any form by the suggested establishment are defined as "gratuitous referrals."

Research on information search sources and decision strategies prior to departure or en route to a destination all exist in the literature.² Research published on specific vacation at-destination search activity is limited. The authors extend this narrow selection of published material on at-destination research via discussion of a cross-section of "locals" and their

specific recommendations for venues to the vacationing public once at their intended final destination. These recommendations include venues such as accommodations, food service, and entertainment.

NRA commissions study

In the late 1980s the National Restaurant Association commissioned a study by Gallup in order to investigate visitor information sources when away from home or on vacation.³ Various advertising media such as the local newspaper, radio, television stations, and billboards were examined as central sources of influential information for visitors. The study also assessed the role of hotel personnel and local townspeople as informational sources. Billboard ads and signs were found to exert the most influence of the advertising media, with 44 percent of respondents reporting being "very influenced" (7 percent) or "somewhat influenced" (37 percent). In contrast, almost two-thirds of respondents reported being "very influenced" (23 percent) and "somewhat influenced" (37 percent) by hotel personnel. A further, somewhat startling finding was that almost 80 percent of those same respondents indicated they were "very influenced" (45 percent) or "somewhat influenced" (34 percent) by the local townspeople.

Investigations of pre-trip and in-transit informational sources used by

travelers (e.g., travel agents, guide books, highway welcome centers) are readily evident in the literature, primarily for the purpose of traveler segmentation analysis to be utilized for information delivery strategies.⁴ Cross-cultural differences in search behavior have also been investigated.⁵ The cross-cultural studies, as with previous research, predominantly relate to pre-trip decision activity and traveler segmentation. Increasing use of the internet, not only as an informational source but also as a pre-trip booking agent, is also manifest.⁶

None of the above precludes a traveler's further necessity for making travel-related decisions at the destination itself. The American Hotel and Lodging Association (AH&LA), the nation's largest trade group for the hotel industry, reported that more than 80 percent of travelers (business traveler, 91 percent; leisure traveler, 83 percent) have advance reservations when checking into public lodging facilities.⁷ To meet the significant demands for various information, local visitor centers purposely provide travelers with destination-specific dining and entertainment/recreational information along with lodging information.

Decisions from model

Whether making a pre-trip or in-transit purchase decision on travel services to be provided at a destination or making the decision at the

destination itself, general models of consumer's decision processes portray a rational, multi-attribute processing that entails an extended version of Fishbein and Ajzen's⁸ model of consumer decision making, that is, a systematic informational search to obtain and weigh attributes that, in turn, translate into beliefs and further form a behavioral intention prior to an actual purchase.⁹ Mediating effects of the consumer's involvement level,¹⁰ peer and informational social influences,¹¹ and situational factors¹² have been shown to influence the sources utilized by consumers and the types of attributes processed in reaching a purchase decision. Rosen and Olshavsky¹³ further proposed that, under some circumstances, the consumer may subcontract (transfer) the decision to a third party who they believe has the appropriate expertise and is trustworthy (e.g., purchasing a travel package through a travel agent may be considered one form of a subcontracted decision). The circumstances typically associated with subcontracting the decision are time constraints, limited expertise on the part of the consumer, a perceived high risk associated with the decision, and a lack of interest in making the decision.

Recent exploratory research investigated and reported upon a subset of visitor at-destination informational search activity for travel services.¹⁴ A southern U.S. rural community (Statesboro, Georgia) and the national

capital of a foreign state (Canberra, Australia) focused upon two distinctively different destinations. The target populations of the studies were people from the local community, but solely concentrated on hotel front office personnel responding to visitor requests for referrals to food service venues. The current study replicated and extended the population of interest to include a broader cross-section of people from the community-police officers, service station attendants, retail clerks and mall service desk personnel, hospital information desk attendants, food service/restaurant personnel, taxi drivers, recreation and entertainment staff, and car rental clerks.

Gratuitous referrals cited

Rompf⁵ drew a critical distinction between at-destination referral activities in general and those he deemed to be genuinely gratuitous and personal in nature, “a gratuitous referral.” He posited that a traveler typically seeks and obtains (hopefully) a personal recommendation (expertise) that, by appearance and/or in practice, is unaffected by monetary or other remuneration (trust) provided by a venue being recommended. As a result he excluded personnel at destination marketing organizations (DMOs) such as highway welcome centers and visitors’ bureaus that, by their nature, did not meet his definition because of general restrictions as to the level of

information they may provide. That is, internally there is a requirement to be balanced in providing referrals to a full list of venues, not advantaging or disadvantaging any specific venue. In addition, there may be a requirement for a venue to be a member of the DMO to be referred.

The general public is probably unaware of the extensive gifts and other forms of remuneration (including cash) a hotel concierge may typically receive from venues to which he/she refers visitors. However, using the criteria of expertise and trust, recommendations provided by a hotel concierge will probably fail the gratuitous referral test and were therefore excluded by Rompf⁶ from the local population being investigated.

In highlighting the significance of local referral activity, Rompf⁷ further posited that there is a high probability of a gratuitously-referred venue recommendation being acted upon by the traveler because of the following:

- The traveler initiated the request
- The decision timeline is relatively immediate
- The perceived “local expert” was pre-selected by the traveler¹⁸

This definition is also consistent with the word-of-mouth literature because the person conveying word-of-mouth information does not profit in a monetary or similar way when the person receiving the word-of-mouth

information decides to patronize the business.¹⁹ Even within the marketing word-of-mouth literature, few studies have examined what happens after the word-of-mouth communication occurs. While for many years, business analysts have purported a positive relationship between word-of-mouth and business performance, the actual financial value of the word-of-mouth information has not been tabulated.

Further research on this topic could be very important to business owners and to marketing researchers.²⁰ The current gratuitous referrals research is also the first to consider the positive word-of-mouth communication solicited by a traveler during the travel experience. Most research has focused on positive word-of-mouth communication after the experience is finished or after the service encounter is complete,²¹ rather than at the destination and situational.

Local residents selected

Local residents of the destination community, Gainesville, Florida, comprised the population of interest. Following reported protocol used in published gratuitous referral studies, an interviewer verbally requested unaided responses to preset questions and recorded respondents' answers on a standardized questionnaire administered in the field. Repeat visits to venues were undertaken to capture referral activity across all of the various

shift periods in a day as well as the weekday versus weekend shifts.

Reported venue referrals by respondents, either with specific venues named or geographic in nature for dining, lodging, and recreation/entertainment were captured. Also recorded was information on the respondents' location, establishment name, day in the week and time of day, and occupation or job title of the respondent. General notes and comments regarding the respondent or location were further recorded for all respondents. Finally, if a lodging facility was the interview venue, also captured was information on the existence of and types of on-site food service facilities, as well as the availability of such facilities being visibly offered nearby.

A total of 137 participants cutting across a broad section of occupational groups within the community provided useable data for the study. A full census of lodging properties was undertaken and, therefore, the majority of respondents (82) were from the lodging sector. Thirty-nine lodging properties (excluding bed & breakfast inns) comprised the local lodging census; 18 were located along an interstate highway corridor, and the remaining were within/around a university or along an old north-south route running through the city. Personnel from 35 properties participated in the study.

Both representative and convenience

sampling of non-lodging venues/occupations was utilized. Where the respondent was from a vastly larger population (e.g., food service venues, shopping venues, police, recreation venue), the data is indicative and not representative of the population. Of the non-lodging respondents, 10 were from food and beverage facilities across the city, ranging from Starbucks and McDonald's to TGI Friday's. Seven were located at museums, historic sites, recreational areas, and shopping venues. Another 23 were at service station locations along the interstate and within the city. Finally, seven airport and city-based car rental agents, four cab drivers in airport queues, a state highway patrolman, and three hospital visitor information staff rounded out the non-lodging respondents.

Nearly 100 percent of hotel front office personnel (none being a concierge) from this and previously cited studies²² reported "frequently receiving" dining referral requests, and approximately 80 percent of them (n = 82) in the Gainesville study reported the same for recreation and entertainment requests. In contrast, 66 percent and 58 percent, respectively, of the non-hotel sample reported "frequently receiving" dining and recreation and entertainment referral requests. On the issue of lodging referrals, the non-hotel sample was split down the middle (51 percent) on receiving lodging requests.

The average number of referral requests per person (not property) per week in the study should also garner attention, especially if you are the proprietor of a venue for potential referral. The weekly number of food service venue referrals varied within and between the study's respondents. Respectively, the rural community respondents reported an average of 7.5 (range 2-37) food service referrals per week, while the foreign capital respondents reported approximately 10 (range 0 - 20) per week. However, the current study respondents reported approximately 22 (range 0 - 200) referral requests per week. Respondents in the Gainesville study further reported an average of 6.9 (range 0 - 60) recreation and entertainment referrals and 3.6 (range 0 - 35) lodging referrals; the latter did not include lodging personnel.

Lodging referrals popular

Multiple venue naming being permitted, summing across all respondents (n = 79) who reported "frequent requests for lodging referrals" generated a total of 170 named lodging venues, with expected venue duplication by respondents. The top 10 (out of 39 possible lodging properties) collectively captured 118 (69 percent) votes, while another 18 hotels received 52 votes. Differences in respondent preferences based on hotel versus non-hotel designation are evident in the data. (See Table 1).

The top four lodging properties in order of frequency among respondents making referrals were Cabot Lodge, Courtyard by Marriott, Hampton Inn, and Motel 6. Cabot Lodge, favored by 24 respondents, far exceeded the competition and was the lead referral property for both hotel (31 percent) and non-hotel respondents (30 percent). No clear second most referred hotel existed, with Courtyard by Marriott (14), Hampton Inn (13), and Motel 6 (13) all in a very close second grouping. Two full-service properties, Doubletree Hotel and Sheraton Hotel, did not make the top 10 list among all respondents. However, the Doubletree

(2) tied for tenth, along with Ramada Limited, Red Roof Inn, and the University Centre Hotel among non-hotel respondents; the Sheraton (5) tied for tenth along with Fairfield Inn and Holiday Inn University among hotel respondents.

One car rental agent at the airport referred travelers to a brochure rack; otherwise, all respondents had specific lodging properties they favored and to which they referred visitors. This was in contrast to some of these same respondents who provided "geographic referrals" (e.g., Archer Road; downtown clubs) for restaurants and recreation and entertainment venue requests.

Table 1: Top 10 recommendations for lodging

Total venues recommended = 28	Full sample	Hotel sample	Non-hotel sample
Multiple recommendations per respondent permitted	79 respondents	52 respondents	27 respondents
Baymont Inn	10 (12.7%)	3 (3.8%)	7 (25.9%)
BestWestern	9 (11.4%)	8 (10.1%)	
Cabot Lodge	24 (30.4%)	16 (30.8%)	8 (29.6%)
Comfort Inn	9 (11.4%)	9 (17.3%)	
Courtyard / Marriott	14 (17.7%)	10 (19.2%)	4 (14.8%)
Doubletree			2 (7.4%)
Hampton Inn	13 (16.5%)	12 (23.1%)	
Holiday Inn Univ.	9 (11.4%)	5 (9.6%)	4 (14.8%)
Motel 6	13 (16.5%)	8 (15.4%)	5 (18.5%)
Quality Inn			4 (14.8%)
Ramada Limited			2 (7.4%)
Red Roof Inn	9 (11.4%)	7 (13.5%)	2 (7.4%)
Rush Lake Motel			3 (11.1%)
Super 8	8 (10.1%)	7 (13.5%)	
Travel Lodge			3 (11.1%)
Univ. Centre Hotel			2 (7.4%)

**Totals more than 100 percent due to multiple responses*

F & B referrals frequent

Consistent with the reported Gallup²³ data, at-destination visitors appear to readily ask locals for recommendations on dining venues for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. In this Gainesville study, 84 percent of all respondents reported being frequently asked for a recommendation for either lunch, dinner, or both (actually breakfast as well, but the questionnaire was not designed to capture it separately and it was combined with luncheon referrals). Of the 137 total respondents, 115 reported frequent requests, with 79 and 36, respectively, being from the lodging and non-lodging segments. As with lodging referrals, respondents were permitted to name more than one restaurant venue, and there appears to be differences between lodging and non-lodging respondent recommendations.

In analyzing the specific venue recommendations, 6 percent of cumulatively "named" dinner venues (14 out of 238; n = 115) across respondents, along with 3 percent of luncheon venues (4 out of 159), were to a designated area of town, Archer Road, instead of to a specific restaurant. A section of Archer Road contains a broad assortment of national and regional chain restaurants (e.g., Bennigan's, Olive Garden, McDonald's, and Outback

Steakhouse), as well as a few independent restaurants. To provide further context, Archer Road tied for tenth place, with the Waffle House for lunch, and was fourth for dinner (Table 2), being mentioned by 14 respondents and ranking behind Outback (29), Carrabbas (21), and Ale House (19).

With an almost 2:1 representation in the sample, lodging personnel highly influence the list of reported venues. Separating into lodging and non-lodging respondents' top 10 list of restaurant referrals, there is both commonality and variation among respondents. In particular, almost twice as many non-lodging (compared to lodging) respondents referred dinner patrons to Archer Road and all of the Archer Road luncheon referrals were from non-lodging respondents. (See Table 2).

When investigating all venue recommendations for lunch, only five of the top 17 recommended by lodging personnel were also given by non-lodging respondents. Similar sundry patterns appear for dinner. In particular, non-lodging respondents exclusively include the Steak & Shake, Shoney's, Fazolli's, and Conestoga Steak on their list of where to dine for dinner and are split, with one lodging property in recommending McDonald's for dinner.

Table 2: Top 10 recommendations for dinner

Total venues recommended = 58	Full sample	Hotel sample	Non-hotel sample
Multiple recommendations per respondent permitted	115 respondents	79 respondents	36 respondents
Outback	29 (25.2%)	20 (25.3%)	9 (25.0%)
Carrabbas	21 (18.3%)	17 (21.5%)	4 (11.1%)
Ale House	19 (16.5%)	15 (18.9%)	4 (11.1%)
Archer Road	14 (12.2%)	5 (6.3%)	9 (25.0%)
Texas Roadhouse	10 (8.7%)	10 (12.7%)	
BallyHoo	8 (7.0%)	8 (10.1%)	
Rafferty's	8 (7.0%)	8 (10.1%)	
Friday's	7 (6.1%)	7 (8.9%)	
Cedar River	5 (4.3%)	5 (6.3%)	
Denny's	5 (4.3%)	5 (6.3%)	
Jade Gardens	5 (4.3%)	5 (6.3%)	
Sawamura			4 (11.1%)
Olive Garden			3 (8.3%)
Bennigans			2 (5.6%)
Chili's			2 (5.6%)
Sonny's			2 (5.6%)

*Totals more than 100 percent due to multiple responses

The top recommendations for lunch by lodging personnel were Ale House (21 percent) and Chili's and Jade Gardens (9 percent each). For the non-lodging segment, the top recommendations were Jade Gardens (15 percent) and Archer Road, Chuck Wagon, and Sonny's (12 percent each).

The top recommendations for dinner by lodging personnel were Outback (19 percent), Carrabbas (16 percent), and Ale House (14 percent). The top recommendations for the non-lodging segment were Archer Road and Outback (23 percent).

Overall, national chain brands greatly surpassed independents in recommendations. This is in contrast to an earlier study²⁴ in a small rural community and in which independent restaurants predominated.

Clubs rank at top

Again with multiple recommendations per respondent permitted, combined recreation and entertainment venue referrals numbered 215 in total when summed across all respondents. These predominantly represented nightclubbing (32 percent);

historical, natural, and cultural tours (28 percent); cinema viewing (10 percent); and shopping (8 percent) as major categories of activities associated with the venues. This entire section had the greatest consistency when comparing referrals by hotel and non-hotel respondents (Table 3).

The number one choice for recreation and entertainment among hotel and non-hotel respondents was "downtown clubs" (30 percent of the hotel employees and 31 percent of the full sample), possibly reflecting a large concentration of nightclubs in a four-block downtown area. Rarely was a specific club mentioned by name except in the case of the Swamp Bar & Restaurant. This centrally located venue received light recommendations from hotel employees and four from non-hotel employees, for a combined total of 6 percent of all recommendations for recreation and entertainment.

For more culturally-oriented experiences, several local museums made the Top 10 list of venues recommended in recreation and entertainment. Again, both hotel and non-hotel respondents were similar in their recommendations. Further alternative types of recreation and entertainment venues recommended by both the hotel and non-hotel respondents

were eco-tourism, geographical anomalies, and natural parks. Among the hotel employees, 4 percent recommended Kanapaha Botanical Gardens and 8 percent of the non-hotel employees recommended Kanapaha. These botanical gardens were the only nature-based attraction recommended by hotel employees.

The Payne's Prairie State Preserve was recommended by 3 percent of hotel employees and 3 percent of non-hotel employees. Devil's Millhopper State Geological Site was recommended by 2 percent of the hotel employees and 5 percent of the non-hotel employees. While both are unique natural attractions which may be well-known venues to the local population, neither the Payne's Prairie State Preserve nor Devil's Millhopper facility were highly recommended sources of recreation and entertainment for visitors.

The only theatrical arts facility recommended by either group was the Hippodrome State Theater, with 3 percent and 7 percent, respectively, of hotel and non-hotel respondents. The Hippodrome features a variety of live plays as well as viewings of independent films and is known for having a regional draw to its audiences. Combined, 4 percent of respondents recommended this venue.

Table 3: Top 10 recommendations for recreation & entertainment

Total venues recommended = 30	Full sample	Hotel sample	Non-hotel sample
Multiple recommendations per respondent permitted	97 respondents	65 respondents	32 respondents
Downtown Clubs	55 (56.7%)	38 (58.5%)	17 (53.1%)
Oaks Mall	17 (17.6%)	12 (18.5%)	5 (15.6%)
Univ. of Florida Campus	16 (16.5%)	12 (18.5%)	4 (12.5%)
Harn Museum	15 (15.5%)	11 (16.9%)	4 (12.5%)
Regal Cinema	15 (15.5%)	11 (16.9%)	4 (12.5%)
Swamp Bar & Rest.	12 (12.4%)	8 (12.3%)	4 (12.5%)
Kanapaha Gardens	11 (11.3%)	6 (9.2%)	5 (15.6%)
Hippodrome Theater	9 (9.3%)	5 (7.7%)	4 (12.5%)
Royal Park Cinema	5 (5.2%)	5 (7.7%)	0
Florida Museum	5 (5.2%)	5 (7.7%)	0

**Totals more than 100 percent due to multiple responses*

Cinema theaters were a third form of frequently recommended entertainment venues provided by both hotel employees and non-hotel employees. Among the hotel workers, 12 percent recommended cinemas. Those not working in hotels recommended cinemas 8 percent of the time. Combined, the full sample of respondents recommended cinemas as a form of recreation and entertainment 11 percent of the time. Shopping was another form of recreation and entertainment recommended by respondents in the Gainesville study. Once again, specific stores were not recommended. Instead, the local mall, Oaks Mall, was recommended by 8 percent of the hotel employees and by 8 percent of the non-hotel respondents.

Local experts help

It is almost an understatement that not all Hyatt properties are totally equal in the quality of the guest service experience. For that matter, nor are Holiday Inns, McDonald's, Bennigan's, or any other branded venue with multiple storefronts. An individual brand may convey very necessary information to the traveler, but is it sufficient for the traveler to make the purchase decision given the variability that may be associated with the brand? Moreover, adventuresome persons may be tired of the "tried and true" and desire an entirely new experience during their travels. The perceived local expert may therefore be summoned at these critical times to contribute information or even decide on the purchase choice. For practitioners, this highlights the importance

of marketing their business to those individuals in the local community who are receiving referral requests from visitors at-destination.

Given that people seeking a place to stay are usually seeking a specific lodging venue recommendation (not vicinity), it should not be surprising to find specific lodging venues being recommended by Gainesville respondents. The stated premise of gratuitous referral research is that travelers expect the same as well for food service and recreational and entertainment requests. If the premise is true, then a significant number of travelers may be disappointed, even frustrated, by the local experts who provided information to general areas as opposed to specific venues.

This study is limited as to generalizability due to small samples sizes across the three segments studied. Replication of this research in other communities along with parallel research with the visitor being the target population is necessitated. Further research questions for future studies include the following:

- How does a traveler select the “local expert” and is there a difference in received value from traditional informational sources (hotel concierge; local visitor’s bureau) versus an expert from the community at large?
- Why does there appear to be such variability in frequency

of requests for like respondents? Are there personality characteristics that make a person more likely to obtain referrals than others?

- What is the post-referral experience actually like for the visitor? The exploration of similarities and differences across destinations will contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon of at-destination search strategies and decision processes utilized by visitors.
- What is the proposed magnitude in tourist dollars as a result of gratuitous referrals?
- Are there methods to be used so that businesses may manage the process of gratuitous referrals?

The current study gives practitioners an insight into where local experts refer visitors to a destination to go. This is of value to them in order to determine how much marketing should be done at the destination, not with the visitors, but with the local community, especially the hospitality community. Many businesses spend a large portion of their advertising and promotional budget away from home trying to attract visitors. This current study and the previous gratuitous referral studies have shown conclusively that many visitors to a destination wait to make many travel decisions

until they are at-destination and rely on the recommendation of the locals.

Initial findings from the limited studies suggest cultural differences may mediate both the visitor and local expert actions/responses. This may be a function of national, religious, or related cultural factors, but it also may be a function of rural versus urban versus metropolitan geography. It could just as easily be due to the interplay or interaction of time and location in a visitor's trip. However, it stands that the gratuitous referral is a topic that merits further investigation with destination cities from the traveler's perspective and from the referrer's perspective.

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