Walking in Memphis: Testing One DMO's Marketing Strategy to Millennials
Marsha D. Loda, Barbara C. Coleman and Kenneth F. Backman
Journal of Travel Research 2010 49: 46 originally published online 19 May 2009
DOI: 10.1177/0047287509336476

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://jtr.sagepub.com/content/49/1/46

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:
Travel and Tourism Research Association

Additional services and information for Journal of Travel Research can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://jtr.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
Subscriptions: http://jtr.sagepub.com/subscriptions
Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
Citations: http://jtr.sagepub.com/content/49/1/46.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Jan 11, 2010
OnlineFirst Version of Record - May 19, 2009
What is This?
Walking in Memphis: Testing One DMO’s Marketing Strategy to Millennials

Marsha D. Loda,1 Barbara C. Coleman,1 and Kenneth F. Backman2

Abstract
This research examines the two promotional strategies most commonly used by destination marketers: traditional advertising and Web sites. While research concerning both advertising and the Internet is abundant, studies comparing tourism marketing strategies, especially those that target the Millennial generation, are limited. In this study a print advertisement and the official Web site for the Memphis Convention and Visitors Bureau are experimentally tested with a sample of members of the Millennial generation. Four dependent variables are examined: (1) attitude toward the destination, (2) message strength, (3) credibility, and (4) purchase intent. Results reinforce the importance of the Internet to tourism marketing and destination selection. Six strategies deduced from the research are written for tourism marketers.

Keywords
marketing; advertising; Web sites; information source; destination selection

Like many cities in the United States, Memphis is poised to capture an increasing share of the travel and tourism market. This is a consequence of escalating consumer living expenses and a shaky economy in which many individuals have elected to take shorter trips that are closer to home (Yesawich 2008). Unfortunately, the same changes in the economy that have prompted many consumers to alter their travel plans also have put many destination marketing organizations (DMOs) in a similarly difficult financial situation (Gretzel, Fesenmaier, Formica and O’Leary 2006). As a result, DMOs must seek out the smartest strategies to maximize their promotional budgets. Traditionally, tourism marketers have used a variety of strategies to promote their destinations, with a considerable amount of tourism budgets spent on domestic advertising (Gretzel et al. 2006). Many DMO marketing efforts now include sites on the World Wide Web but with varying levels of sophistication (Wang, Hwang, and Fesenmaier 2006). Should DMOs invest more of their promotion budgets in Web sites or in advertising? Should they explore different target markets, especially Internet-savvy young adults? Relevant tourism marketing research should help with this real-world problem (Li and Petrick 2008).

The purpose of this research is twofold. The first is to explore whether the Millennial age cohort, which is typically defined as the 18-to-24 age group (Cheng 1999), is a potential target for Memphis. The second purpose is to examine the two promotional strategies most commonly used by destination marketers: traditional advertising and Web sites. Is there a way to make their use more efficient and effective? Is one superior to the other in reaching the college-age cohort? This research compares responses to the Memphis Convention and Visitor Bureau’s Web site and a print ad to answer these questions. The two vehicles are experimentally manipulated to examine their effect on four variables: (1) attitude toward the destination, (2) message strength, (3) message credibility, and (4) purchase intent.

Millennials: A Present and Future Target Market
The young adult age cohort known as Gen Y or Millennials is one of today’s most coveted markets because it numbers approximately 80 million and it has greater spending power than its predecessor, Gen X (Cheng 1999; Wolburg and Pokrywcynski 2001). Moreover, Millennials are an especially attractive market for DMOs because they think in terms of frequent, short-stay, inexpensive trips (Murray 2008). As a consequence, domestic destinations such as Memphis are uniquely positioned to appeal to this segment in the present as well as the future. As there is a paucity of research with respect to Millennials’ preferred destination information sources, this study contributes to a better understanding of how best to reach this age cohort.

1Augusta State University
2Clemson University
Advertising and the Internet: A Plethora of Literature

From the supply side, destination promotion is a recurring topic in the tourism literature. From the demand side, information search strategies that drive consumer decisions and purchase behavior are often studied by both tourism and general marketing scholars. In addition, articles about Internet effectiveness and new media such as mobile marketing are beginning to emerge (Trappey and Woodside 2005; Pan, MacLaurin, and Crotts 2007; Moronson and Fesenmaier 2007; Park and Gretzel 2007). However, given all this research and attention, there are only a handful of widely accepted tenets. One such tenet is that information from friends and family—word-of-mouth advertising—is the most effective (Crompton 1979; Vogt, Stewart, and Fesenmaier 1998); the other is that people often distrust and discount traditional advertising (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975; Fry and McDougall 1974; Li and Miniard 2006). Lastly, it is well accepted that the Internet is having a profound impact on tourism marketing; indeed, it is a paradigm shift (Li and Petrick 2008; Puharinger and Taylor 2008; Gretzel et al. 2006).

Recent research in advertising and marketing journals that compares the Internet with traditional media has focused on the comparison with television or with print and television. Eveland and Dunwoody (2002) compared the Web and print ads, demonstrating that the Internet elicits more elaboration than does print. They surmise that because the Internet makes connections among related bits of information, the structure of the Internet is similar to the human thought process. Chang and Thorson (2004) found that using the Web in combination with television leads to significantly higher attention and message credibility than did repeated exposure to television alone. In comparing multimedia campaigns (television, print, and Internet) with single-media efforts, Dijkstra, Buijtsels, and van Raaij (2005) assert that television campaigns are superior to multimedia campaigns in evoking cognitive responses and that print-only campaigns are as effective as multimedia efforts. However, they found a complementary effect for multimedia campaigns compared to Internet-only marketing approaches. In 2007 Havlena, Cardarelli, and Montigny found media synergies among magazine, online, and television advertising for heavy media users. They recommended using print and television to build awareness and shift perceptions; the addition of the Internet was specifically recommended to target low television users.

Tourism Research Findings

Researchers in the travel and tourism arena have examined a number of areas related to marketing, including information sources used in destination selection and how tourism images are formed. Because tourism-related services emerged early as a leading product category on the Internet (Connolly and Moore 1998), it follows that studies concerning tourism marketing and the Internet are well represented. Web site assessment is a current topic of investigation.

In their study of Web usage by 600 American convention and visitor bureaus, Wang, Hwang, and Fesenmaier (2006) find that, while most bureaus have an Internet presence, their Internet marketing activities are relatively limited and focused on disseminating destination information to prospective visitors. From the consumer’s perspective, Kaplanidou and Vogt (2006) reported that perceived Web site usefulness was a significant predictor of intent to travel. Specifically, they found that motivating visuals and trip information functionality were significantly related to Web site usefulness. Another study identified nine factors that contribute to a tourism Web site’s success. These include information quality, ease of use, visual appearance, trust, and interactivity (Park and Gretzel 2007).

While tourism research concerning the Internet is active and maturing, research that is directly related to the destination search strategies of Millennials or that compares the effectiveness of traditional advertising is limited. In general, advertising effectiveness is difficult to measure because many variables other than advertising can be involved in destination selection. In response, Butterfield, Deal, and Kubursi (1998) developed a framework for measuring the impact of tourism marketing. Their approach first linked advertising to changes in attitude and awareness, and then linked these changes to number of visits. Lastly, changes in visits were connected to changes in marketing spend. The study used actual data derived from an advertising campaign for Ontario, Canada. Results indicate that tourism advertising has significant effects on both the number of tourist visits and their expenditures. What is not known, however, is the type of advertising done in the Ontario campaign (i.e., direct mail, advertising, public relations) or the media mix used (i.e., print or broadcast). Internet marketing was likely not used, as the actual campaign was implemented in 1987.

The Ontario study is one of only a handful that compares the effectiveness of specific tourism marketing strategies. In another, Smith and Vogt (1995) used the expectancy-value model as a framework to compare the effect of advertising and negative word-of-mouth communication on tourism messages. A test was conducted using four experimental treatments: advertising only, negative word of mouth only, advertising then negative word of mouth, and negative word of mouth then advertising. Results revealed that negative word-of-mouth communication reduced the perceived credibility of advertising as well as brand attitudes and purchase intent for a specific vacation destination.
Targeting Millennials

The spending power of 18.3 million college students, a very attractive subgroup of the Millennial cohort, is estimated to reach $5.3 billion this year (Saranow 2008). Of that figure, $1 billion is being spent on spring break trips (Miller 2004). Information on how spring break travelers use information sources is available (Klenosky 2002; Smith and MacKay 2001; Butts et al. 1996). Loda, Norman, and Backman (2007) compared the strategy of using print advertising versus using print publicity to promote a tourist destination to the Millennial market. Four dependent variables were studied: message strength, perceived credibility, attitude toward the destination, and purchase intent. Results suggested that publicity was more persuasive than advertising in reaching college students and that the publicity-then-advertising sequence was most effective at persuading potential customers to visit a tourist destination.

A second issue is whether traditional media investments are more or less effective in communicating destination image. Because image “affects the intentions and decisions of consumers before visiting a destination” (Tasci and Gartner 2007, p. 422), it is critical that marketers use media that best capture image. Pragmatic issues also dictate that marketers choose media classes that their target segments use. As a consequence, because Millennials use the Internet, tourism marketers now devote significant resources there. In a study of the Web site elements most commonly used and valued by Millennials, Loda, Teichmann, and Zins (2009) report that information concerning fundamental elements such as accommodations and attractions has the most effect on message credibility and the change in respondents’ propensity to visit a destination. Novel Web site applications such as Web cams, visitor testimonials, guest books, and e-cards had no significant impact on Millennials. Magazines should also be included in the mix as current research shows that Millennials regularly read them for information as well as entertainment (Reese 1997; Choi et al. 2000; Steinberg 2007).

Theoretical Foundation

This study is a replication of the experiments by Smith and Vogt (1995) and Loda, Norman, and Backman (2007). However, rather than comparing negative word of mouth with advertising or publicity with advertising, it examines print advertising and a DMO Web site to determine whether one strategy is more effective than the other. No research has been located that compares two integrated marketing components widely used by DMOS—print advertising and Web sites.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) provides the theoretical underpinning for much of the research to date evaluating Internet advertising (Kim and McMillan 2008). This study uses both the ELM and Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) Expectancy-Value (EV) theory to measure responses to the two message formats.

This study presumes that consumers evaluating potential tourist destinations are highly involved and consider message content carefully. Increased elaboration enhances persuasion when the message is strong and accepted but diminishes persuasion when the message is weak (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Factors that influence message acceptance include perceived credibility (i.e., truthfulness and accuracy) and message strength (i.e., weak or strong reasoning in message claims). This study will examine how these two variables affect message acceptance.

The EV Theory purports that attitude affects behavioral intent. Attitude toward brand and purchase intent are common variables in marketing research projects (Hallahan 1999). Therefore, attitude toward the destination and purchase intent are studied as measures of message response.

The Variables

Message stimulus is the independent variable in this study and consists of five levels in which information source and sequencing are manipulated. They are (1) Web site only, (2) print advertising only, (3) Web then print advertising, (4) print advertising then Web, and (5) a control group. Four dependent variables are organized into two categories: (1) message acceptance, which is composed of perceived credibility and message strength, and (2) message response, which consists of attitude toward the destination and purchase intent.

Hypotheses

The research questions guiding this study examine four dependent variables: credibility, message strength, attitude toward the destination, and purchase intent. Specifically, the study looks at whether Millennials perceive a difference in these variables depending on the information source or presentation strategy (print advertising or Web site) and on the sequencing of message delivery (print advertising then Web exposure or Web then print advertising). While the literature provides no clear consensus either on the relative superiority of the Web versus print advertising or their sequencing effects, this research conforms to the judgment that a Web site is more effective than traditional print advertising. With Millennials as the subjects, the hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis 1A: A DMO Web site will have a significantly greater impact on credibility than print advertising.

Hypothesis 1B: A sequence beginning with a DMO Web site will have a significantly greater impact on credibility than a sequence beginning with print advertising.
Hypothesis 2A: A DMO Web site will have a significantly greater impact on message strength than print advertising.

Hypothesis 2B: A DMO Web site, presented before print advertising, will have a significantly greater impact on message strength than if print advertising were seen first.

Hypothesis 3A: A DMO Web site will have a significantly greater impact on attitude toward the destination than print advertising.

Hypothesis 3B: A DMO Web site, presented before print advertising, will have a significantly greater impact on attitude toward the destination than print advertising alone.

Hypothesis 4A: A DMO Web site will have a significantly greater impact on purchase intent than print advertising.

Hypothesis 4B: A DMO Web site, presented before print advertising, will have a significantly greater impact on purchase intent than print advertising alone.

Method

The research was conducted as an experiment using a post-test-only group design, ensuring that participants are not biased by previous exposures or learning through pretests (Kirk 1982). To explore the first two hypotheses (credibility and message strength), four treatment groups were used: (1) print advertising only, (2) Web site only, (3) print advertising then Web site, and (4) Web site then print advertising. Analysis of the remaining hypotheses included the addition of a control group to the original four levels. As the later hypotheses tested message response (attitude toward the destination and purchase intent), a control group was used because respondents could rate these variables without having seen the stimulus materials.

Stimulus Materials

The methodology outlined above is consistent with the Loda, Norman, and Backman (2007) study. However, the current study differs not just in the type of stimulus used (Web site vs. advertising rather than publicity vs. advertising) but it also uses actual rather than fabricated stimulus materials. For the 2007 study, stimulus materials were designed to closely resemble a one-page advertisement and a one-page article in a popular shelter magazine. The two stimuli promoted the same destination attributes and were elaborately pretested until they were rated by respondents in a pilot study as equally persuasive (using a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is not at all persuasive and 10 being extremely persuasive). The island destination of Aruba was selected because it would be of interest to a student population but exotic enough to limit familiarity.

In the current study an actual DMO Web site and print advertisement were used as stimulus materials. In the media marketplace, print advertisements and Web sites are different; they look different and they often do not cover the exact same attributes or copy points. Actual marketing materials were used as stimuli to more closely duplicate how consumers learn about potential vacation destinations. Memphis, Tennessee, was chosen as the test destination for three reasons: (1) the authors’ interest, (2) its music emphasis could be of interest to Millennials, and (3) it was seen as more “real world” and accessible to Millennials than an island destination. Participants in the experiment were exposed to these treatments: advertising only, Web site only, print advertising then Web site, Web site then print advertising, and no treatment (control group).

Data Collection Procedures

The study population for this research was students at two different universities in the southeastern United States. Participants with a prior visit to Memphis were excluded from the research analysis. To allow for this, a sample size of 337 was targeted to yield at least 30 responses per group so that the central limit theorem would apply, and normal distribution would be ensured for each group (Salkind 1994).

Each participant was randomly assigned a booklet containing instructions, stimulus materials, or directions to a Web site and survey questions to be completed following exposure to the stimulus. Subjects were instructed to spend as much time as they needed to thoroughly review the stimulus materials (depending on the experimental group). Next, the dependent measures were collected (subjects were not allowed to return to the stimulus materials). Following the procedure of Smith and Vogt (1995), involvement was encouraged of all groups. To create reasonably high processing involvement, subjects were instructed to “consider yourself a person who has saved their funds, and now has the time and money to take a vacation.” They were told first to read the materials carefully and form an evaluation of the destination; then they were informed that afterward they would be asked some questions about the destination.

Following exposure to the treatment, data were collected to measure the four dependent variables. The measures were based on those used by Smith and Vogt (1995). Multi-item scales with bipolar anchors used a 7-point scale (see Table 1). The reliability measures for the four dimensions of the scale are well within an acceptable range (Nunnally 1978).

Analysis and Results

Scales were combined and averaged to create one value for each dependent variable. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was run for each of the four dependent variables, perceived credibility, message strength, attitude toward the
**Results of Hypotheses**

Hypothesis 1A tested perceived credibility of advertising only and Web only, without a control group (respondents could not rate these variables if they were not exposed to stimulus materials) and was not supported ($F = 0.26, p = .86$). Therefore, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that a DMO Web site will generate greater credibility among Millennials than print advertising does.

Hypothesis 1B concerned the sequencing impact on the credibility variable. Multiple comparisons revealed no difference ($p = .50$ for the ad-then-Web and Web-then-ad comparison; $p = .92$ for the Web-only and ad-then-Web comparison). This indicates that a DMO Web site, viewed before print advertising, will not have a significantly greater impact on credibility among Millennials than when print advertising is viewed first.

Hypothesis 2A tested the message strength of advertising against a DMO Web site, also without a control group. It was supported ($F = 3.25, p = .02$; Table 2). Hence, according to this study, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that a DMO Web site will have greater impact on message strength than advertising among the college-age cohort.

Hypothesis 2B concerned the sequencing impact on message strength. Multiple comparisons revealed areas of significance, although the hypothesis was not accepted. The only significant sequencing effect occurred when advertising was viewed first. The Web-then-ad sequence ($M = 5.32$) was not significant to ad only ($M = 5.00$) while the ad-then-Web sequence ($M = 5.55$) did show a significant difference (Table 3). Therefore, there is insufficient support that seeing a Web site first generates higher message strength among Millennials. This indicates that message strength improves among Millennials with the addition of a Web presentation but the Web does not have to begin the sequence.

Hypothesis 3A explored attitude toward the destination using a control group, and was accepted ($F = 3.69, p \leq .01$; Table 4). To clarify, however, the only area of significant difference was between Web only and the control group ($p \leq .01$), and not between Web only and ad only ($p = .13$). Moreover, the ad-only treatment was not significantly different from the control group. Therefore, according to this research, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that a DMO Web site creates a more favorable attitude toward a destination among Millennials than does print advertising.

Whether sequencing affects attitude toward the destination was explored in hypothesis 3B and rejected. Multiple comparisons showed significance for all treatments against the control group except for ad only. In fact, the mean for ad then Web ($M = 5.28$) was slightly higher than for Web then ad ($M = 5.17$) (Table 5). According to this research, when a...
DMO Web site is viewed before an advertisement, there is no difference in Millennials’ attitudes toward a destination than if the advertisement was seen first.

The purchase intent variable was examined in hypothesis 4A to see if a DMO Web site had more impact than a print advertisement, and it did not. Although the ANOVA showed a significant difference ($F = 5.73, p \leq .01$), the significance was between Web only and control ($p \leq .01$) and not against print ad only ($p = .27$). It follows then that a DMO Web site does not generate more purchase intent among Millennials than does an advertisement.

Hypothesis 4B looked at whether seeing a DMO Web site first created more purchase intent. This hypothesis was also rejected. Once again, all of the treatments were significant in comparison with the control group except print advertising only. Means for the ad-then-Web sequence ($M = 3.32$) were similar to the Web-then-ad treatment ($M = 3.45$). This suggests that it does not matter whether Millennials viewed a DMO Web site or an advertisement first in terms of the amount of purchase intent generated by the messages.

The ANOVA that examined purchase intent also indicates that marketing could help make Memphis a more attractive destination for Millennials. The three treatments, Web only, Web then ad, and ad then Web, resulted in a significant increase in the intent to visit Memphis compared with the control group that saw no stimulus. One exception, the treatment of print advertising only, did not create a significant difference in the intent to visit.

**Charts of Group Means**

Bar charts of group means were created (Figures 1 to 4). The highest bars in each chart included either Web only or some combination of Web and advertising. In this study, the only area of significance among treatments was in relation to ad only for the message strength variable. When the control group was used, all treatments were significantly different from the group that saw no stimulus except for ad only. Areas of significance are summarized in Tables 3 and 5.

**Discussion and Applications**

This research reinforces the study of Loda, Norman, and Backman (2007) that found advertising only to be the weakest strategy for tourism marketers wanting to influence message strength, credibility, attitude, and purchase intent. The 2007 study reaffirmed Gartner’s (1993) credibility typology wherein more “organic” or less obviously

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>Treatment Group</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitude to destination</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>Web only</td>
<td>5.28</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ad then Web</td>
<td>5.28</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Web then ad</td>
<td>5.17</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase intent</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>Web only</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ad then Web</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Web then ad</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
commercial messages are more persuasive. This current study adds to that body of knowledge. Advertising’s obvious commercial tone had little influence when used alone while the Web site, arguably less commercial in nature, consistently received higher means.

In this study, the Web, either alone or in combination with print advertising, scored highest for all variables, although the differences were not always significant. Print advertising, used alone, consistently produced the lowest mean for all variables. In fact, print advertising only was not significantly different from the control group for its effect on attitude and purchase intent.

This study also highlights the importance of the Internet to tourism marketing in attracting Millennials. Clearly, the Web site for the Memphis Convention and Visitors Bureau is a crucial part of the marketing mix for this age cohort. The site is important to conveying the strength of Memphis’s tourism message, for forming an attitude about Memphis as a potential destination and perhaps most importantly, for influencing purchase intent.

More importantly, this finding is consistent with the media-use habits and technological savvy of the Millennial market. “Millennials have been surrounded by broadband, cable, Internet, computers and cell phones since birth — and as the digital vanguard, they will define the future of content. To remain competitive, the content delivery industry must provide the individualized, interactive applications Millennials want” (Stein 2008).

Regarding sequencing effects, results were mixed. For two variables (message strength and attitude), seeing the ad first generated higher means. For two other variables (credibility and purchase intent), respondents initially exposed to the Web site recorded higher mean scores. Seeing the ad first was significant only for the message strength variable. Perhaps this lack of effect is explained by pioneer Internet researchers Gallagher, Foster, and Parsons (2001), who noted, “People are expert ad processors, regardless of the medium” (p. 68). In other words, the authors surmised that people respond to advertisements in a skeptical manner, regardless of the medium that carries the message.

The major implication from this study is that a DMO cannot rely on advertising alone to attract the Millennial market. Although the advertising sequence added support to message variables, a Web presence is critical to reaching the lucrative and growing college-age cohort. The overall results suggest that Web sites and advertising have a greater impact on the young adult traveler when they are used together.

As Li and Petrick (2008) state, tourism marketing literature often lacks relevance for tourism marketers because of a gap between research and real-world practices. More pragmatic, suggested strategies follow this article as a postscript in an effort to take the knowledge gained from this study and apply it to the real world.

**Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research**

Several limitations are present in this research. It was conducted in a laboratory setting with college students as respondents. This is not how the broader marketplace encounters tourism marketing. Actual marketing materials from the Memphis Convention and Visitors Bureau are used in an effort to inject realism. However, these materials may not be representative and may affect the findings. The issues to be addressed in a comprehensive comparison of advertising and the Internet are broad and cannot be adequately treated in a single study. This study is limited to one print advertisement and one DMO Web site and measures only four dependent variables. Similarly, this study needs to be replicated in other settings, with other populations, and with other products. The impact of influential media such as informal word of mouth, publicity, mobile media, and other sources, commonly and newly encountered, should be incorporated in future research.

Certainly measuring real behavior as opposed to purchase intent would increase the study’s importance. Therefore, longitudinal research is recommended to accurately capture the persuasiveness of tourism communication leading to behavioral change.

**Postscript: Pragmatic Strategies for Tourism Marketers**

The results of this research suggest that there is no significant difference between the control group that was not exposed to anything and the group that saw an advertisement as far as attitude formation and intentions to visit are concerned. This potential pill can be a difficult one to swallow for tourism marketers who spend many thousands of dollars on print ads. There are, nevertheless, several strategies that can be deduced from this research as well as the personal experience of the authors that can improve marketing efforts at the DMO level. Deductive “if . . . then” reasoning suggests six strategies.
First, if Web sites score the highest, then create a great Web site. Don’t skimp.

This research confirms that Web sites are essential components that influence attitude formation and intention to visit. As destination selection is a high involvement and risky decision, advertisements cannot supply the amount of information needed for decision making. The Internet provides a portal for a deep and rich information flow. It is where customers go to find information about destinations. Focus adequate time and resources on it.

Second, if Web sites are so important, then people need to see your Web site. Perhaps your advertising dollars could be best used to drive traffic to your site.

In this study, subjects who saw the ad first and then the Web site reacted almost as positively as those who just saw the Web site. It must be remembered, however, that this research was conducted in an environment where subjects were instructed to visit a Web site and otherwise had no control over what they saw. As a consequence, the probability of them visiting the Memphis DMO Web site independent of this experiment is unknown. Advertising is still necessary for creating awareness and piquing potential customers’ interest enough to get them to check out a Web site.

Moreover, people who saw the Web site first and the ad after thought that the messages had more credibility, and more of them said they would like to visit (although not significantly so). The conclusion to be drawn is that the greatest Web site in the world means nothing if people are not made aware of the destination.

Third, if you are going to the expense of advertising, then test it to make sure it is driving people to the Web site.

Because media is expensive, do not guess—test. For example, identify the target market. Gather representative members, and enlist their help in selecting the most effective ad(s) from among several alternatives. Because it matters, ask members to identify the most effective size. Scale some ad placements down in size (start about 20% smaller) and track responses. Put tracking incentives in ads to identify what is working. An example might include entering the word "magic" in a welcome box and offering a coupon.

Fourth, if your advertising works and gets people to your Web site, then make sure you know what your Web site needs to do to influence the sale.

Research, such as focus groups and personal interviews, is absolutely essential to better understand the target market. Even when ads appear to work and more people than ever are visiting the Web site, until marketers know what it is about this destination that makes the most people raise their hands and say yes, they still are not doing their job. An ad may motivate people to come to a Web site once; only research will identify which amenities to promote to boost the odds of converting potential to actual visitors.

Fifth, if Web sites are so important, then make sure even the details are understandable.

Additional research should focus on ease of use of the Web site. Pay some prospective customers to visit the site and provide feedback, or consider hiring a mystery shopper who has never been to the destination. Have them plan a trip using the Web site and then provide feedback on both the site and the destination. “Your site keeps mentioning ‘the Garden district’ but I can’t find that anywhere on a map . . . .” Mystery shoppers can provide very valuable insight.

Sixth, if a Web site can improve purchase intent, then you need to follow up with these prospects.

When you get a hit on your Web site, you have a hot prospect. You cannot buy a prospect list this good. Develop a multitier plan of follow-up. Use friendly messages that offer continuously more lucrative incentives to visit. As they have to request the incentives from you, you will know when they “bite” and can then remove them from your follow-up list (or of course they can easily opt out).

Finally, take charge.

Travel and tourism journals have a lot of research and information about what makes an effective Web site. Read. Know the state of the art for tourism Web sites. Then track and measure almost everything you do. Track what parts of your site get the most hits; know what parts of your site are not used. Use your customers (focus groups) to make the good parts even better and the unused parts useful. Knowledge is power. Take charge and know that your most important marketing tool, your DMO’s Web site, is working its hardest for your community.

References


Loda et al.


Bios

Marsha D. Loda, PhD, was a principle in ad advertising agency for 15 years and the director of marketing for the largest tourism business in North Carolina. She got her PhD in 2003 and is an assistant professor of marketing in the Hull college of Business at Augusta State University in Augusta, Georgia.

Barbara C. Coleman, PhD, is the associate dean of the Hull College of Business in Augusta, where she also teaches marketing. She has served as a research consultant for a number of national organizations that include the Sports Car Club of America and Southern Baptist Churches.

Kenneth F. Backman, PhD, is an associate professor at Clemson University in Clemson, South Carolina. His research interests include tourism marketing and community tourism development.