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Keywords

internet, needs, customer, process, source, buying, recreational, online, information, capability, travellers, value

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Sources Of Value Online For Recreational Travellers: Customer Information Needs In The Buying Process And Internet Capability

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Abstract

The information needs of buyers of high involvement recreational travel products are potentially a source of customer value in their decision making process. The internet's ability to provide large amounts of information in real time with high levels of customer convenience are compounded by the ability to deliver information from multiple sources. In theory then, the internet seems able to largely replace the value delivered by retail travel intermediaries in the physical world. This critical review suggests however that the physical world intermediaries and online information sources are more likely to be complementary rather than competitive resources for shoppers for such products. The resulting conclusions offer suggestions on internet applications for principal travel service providers as well as wholesale package travel marketers and online retail intermediaries.

Introduction

Recreational travellers face a challenge determining merits of service providers when purchasing travel arrangements to new and unfamiliar destinations. Recreational travel experiences are archetypical "experience products" as defined by Gilmour and Pine (1998) as travellers make decisions based initially on tastes which are typically very complex in nature.

This presents a challenge to the belief that as travel bookings are effectively an exchange of information, they are ideally suited to online interaction. For a high involvement product such as recreational travel, with a presumably positive motivation in purchase, an information search should be a gratifying part of the consumer's experience. Consumers buying products for personal gratification are likely to exhibit the increase in drive referred to by Rossiter and Percy (1998 p 121). It is reasonable to expect a strong engagement in information search by participants in such a decision making process. The purpose of this paper is to critically review this key source of value for purchasers of recreational travel products with particular reference to the value added by electronic networks.

Ratchford, Lee and Talukdar (2003 p) point to the inadequacies of research on information seeking by customers for physical products and draw some links to use of the internet in information search by car buyers. Their identification of source types used in traditional decision making and the equivalent online sources of manufacturers (service providers), non advocacy sources (independent information sources) and forums or exchanges (peer group interactions) gives a useful framework for comparison of offline and online value. The terminology in parentheses may be used for the balance of this paper.

This paper uses the information gathering, evaluation and purchasing stages in the hierarchy of effects model (Lavidge and Steiner 1961) for consideration of a consumer moving through a decision process in purchasing

recreational travel to a new and unfamiliar destination. In doing so, sources of value as well as shortcomings on the use of internet sources and facilities for this purpose are identified.

The awareness and interest phases of the hierarchy of effects model (Lavidge and Steiner 1961) are not addressed owing to the multiple influences that may be brought to bear in these phases, complicated by reference group (Kotler et al 2004 pp255-6) effects. In the same way post-purchase behaviour is beyond the scope of the paper owing to the subjective nature of travel experiences themselves combined with their inherent variability (Bateson and Hofman 1999 p 18). The evaluation and purchase process arising from the information gathered involve very different activities on the part of the consumer and may need to be dealt with in separate papers. While there is probably a degree of evaluation in the process of information gathering, this paper takes the consumer's internal process differences as the basis of separation.

The paper will not attempt to address the quantum of information accessed by potential travel purchasers as with the propositions in Peterson and Merino (2003 p 109) and Ratchford, Lee and Talukdar (2003). Its purpose is rather to generate a better level of understanding with focus on selected areas of the wide ranging propositions developed by Peterson and Merino (2003). In doing this, it is important to bear Peterson and Merino's (2003) important qualifications of internet use for information seeking, most notably the limits on access that exists for some as well as the limited use that many people seem to put it to. E-mail in particular seems to be the "killer application" used by more internet users than any other application (Mohammed, et al 2002 p 392). Only a proportion of internet users choose to access web browsers and the assumption that all users have the motivation, ability and access to all internet applications is flawed. For what seems to be a substantial number of internet users who do not use browser applications or use them at a basic level, this paper is effectively irrelevant.

Recreational travel product information search

Recreational travel products are typically purchased for personal gratification and are high involvement in nature being typically costly. Note that this paper restricts itself to the goal directed behaviour described by Peterson and Merino (2003 p 101-2) and does not take account of the general or continuous information seeking (surfing) that some people do online for perhaps hedonic purposes. Such people may be thought of as seeking vicarious indulgence of their needs for recreational travel experiences and a social rather than a business phenomenon.

Ratchford, Lee and Talukdar's (2003) study suggested that the quantum of time for information search online was likely to be less than that for people accessing offline sources notwithstanding their greater apparent need for information. The smaller time investment is simply a reflection of the internet's superior efficiency in delivering information to a searching consumer. Interestingly, the study showed a majority of search activity concentrated on manufacturer's resources. Information on price accounted for the single greatest amount of search activity at virtually 100% of respondents with performance and reliability at around 65% of respondents. While motor cars and recreational travel are both likely to be high involvement decisions and price may be taken as a given common interest, the performance and reliability dimensions do not easily translate to a pure indulgence like recreational travel. Performance and reliability are logical interests of car buyers given the functional, durability and image components of value for car purchases. A tangible, durable product like a motor car is more likely to be classified as an information product by Rossiter and Percy (1998 p 264) than the transformational nature of a travel experience. The dimensions searched for travel choices are likely to be much more complex and highly subjective based on an individual traveller's interests and motivation. A person from Europe, the USA or Australasia seeking a first time eco tourism experience in Africa may have primary motives of an exotic experience combined with a learning experience and an adventure component. On the other hand, a Pacific Island resort experience may be motivated by seeking an experience that offers rest, tranquillity and physical beauty in an exotic cultural setting. Such complexity is beyond the scope of this paper and it proceeds from the point that search criteria may be both highly variable and very subjective in nature.

This paper concentrates on information sources from service providers and independent information sources rather than peer groups. The choice of focus is based on the premise that peer groups may have their primary input in the evaluation stage when validation is sought of the qualitative dimensions of the information discovered and brought into consideration. This may therefore be taken into account as a source of value in the evaluation of options rather than the information gathering phase of the process.

Customer needs

To develop a focus on the customer needs that are likely to be sources of value the paper presents and discusses the most likely key needs in the form of a series of propositions.

P1: *A trusted source of information at service provider level is a key customer need*

The paper's focus is on the information gathering part of the hierarchy of effects; consideration of processing or the effect of the communication will have to be addressed separately. In all likelihood cognitive processing and attitude formulation on service providers may be happening simultaneously with information gathering processes to some extent. This paper treats them separately because of the cognitive behaviour and different needs for processing by the consumer.

The paper works from the assumption that the "type" of recreational experience has been substantially decided and the evoked set (Ziethaml and Bitner 2003 p 41) or options for supply of the type of holiday may have been decided. It is interesting however to note Peterson and Merino's (2003 p 113) proposition that the evoked set may not likely be affected by use of the internet in search processes. At this point customers begin to wrestle with the more difficult qualitative and subjective dimensions of their choice of actual holiday. One person's idea of "fun" may be very different from another (Hanson 2000 p) so how does a potential traveller get an appreciation of such highly subjective but critically important attributes of a recreational experience? Rossiter and Percy (1998 p 264) suggest the key requirement for an information source in delivering positive brand attitudes that may lead to consumer purchase for a high involvement transformational product is likely to be the similarity to the consumer. A key source of value is the customer's ability to identify with the information source which is likely to be most effective at a personal level rather than using impersonal media sources. A travel consultant who builds up a track record of good recommendations for a customer over time may evolve into a major source of value for both intermediary and principal. One of the primary bases of a relationship is trust (Dann and Dann 2004, pp 326–327) which is best achieved at affective and psychological levels by consistent performance over time.

P2: *Personal "expert" recommendations are an important supplement to sponsor generated print and audio visual sources of information.*

Perhaps the best evidence of this customer need for a trusted source is airline and other travel product principal sponsorship of familiarisation or educational visits by retail travel agents to destinations. In effect this achieves a local presence for their product with ability to advise potential travellers based on personal experience as a major source of value in distribution. It is interesting to note the initiatives taken by airlines in the process of domestic deregulation in Australia (circa 1990) to minimise the number of bookings done direct with customers in favour of the lower cost option of bookings through retail agents. Since agents are not a truly independent source of customer information (subject to bias from personal preferences, commercial considerations like levels of commission paid or even personal relationships of retail travel consultants with sales representatives) they are classified as a service provider in this paper.

The real time performance of travel experiences renders previews or sampling of a travel service prior to purchase impossible. As a result, travel service providers have invested extensively in support media for personal sales to satisfy customer information needs in the form of audio visual and printed materials. Such materials are typically sponsor generated and subject to credibility issues in the mind of a customer unless accompanied by a strong recommendation or endorsement from an "expert" personal source. In effect personal endorsement has to compensate for inability to deliver powerful emotional stimuli such as smell, taste and touch through the audio visual and/or verbal character of promotional media. The challenge here is the cognitive nature of audio and visual stimuli as opposed to the far more emotive olfactory, gustatory and tactile sensory stimuli (Champy, Buday and Nohria 1996). Bridging this gap requires injection of personal recommendation, preferably from a trusted source to give a level of comfort to the customer with their decision and to help in shaping their expectation of the experience to come.

P3: *Discovery of options for travel experience fulfilment may be a significant part of information search needs*

It is possible that consumers opting for an out of the ordinary exotic experience may not have fully formulated their decision criteria and this may be part of their information search need. For example a person considering an African safari eco experience, may have an idea of the adventure attribute that they are looking for without being aware of how it may be delivered. Modes of delivery such as walking safaris, sleeping out overnight in wilderness areas, spotlighting for nocturnal species, use of rustic accommodation or travel in open vehicles for encounters with potentially dangerous animals may need to be explored to help build final decision criteria.

P4: *Choice of purchase of travel arrangements in the form of an inclusive package or as independent components or modules may affect both the nature and the quantum of the information search*

An important variable is the difference likely to occur in information searches by people buying "packaged" arrangements from a centralized source and those buying on a component by component basis. In the latter case the search may have to be repeated not only many times over but with different criteria for the different services or components that may go toward making up the travel experience. Search criteria for accommodation or touring arrangements for example may have a far greater emphasis on experiential dimensions than airline travel which may have a greater price focus as a means to an end.

P4a: *The nature of information required by travellers using inclusive package arrangements from a single source supplier may vary based on the level of specialisation of the arrangements*

The main decision criteria for purchasers of packaged arrangements may relate to the level of speciality of the service provider. Such travel offerings are typically classified by breadth or depth of travel offering since it may be difficult for an organisation to achieve both of these dimensions. Note that in this instance the service provider is an intermediary rather than a principal provider of services. For example, an organisation like Kuoni (http://www.kuoni.co.uk) has extensive coverage of multiple destinations on almost every continent with a high degree of assurance for a consumer resulting from their scope of operations. On the other hand they do not compete with a specialist operator offering depth in a special interest area like Martin Randall Travel (http://www.martinrandalltravel.com/) which specialises in high-end art and culture tourism. The information needs for customers interested in either of these two extremes are likely to be very different.

The mass coverage of Kuoni features main stream product offerings in a range of price options to deal with the wide coverage in their market. These are typically a mix of flights, hotels, transport and different levels of touring and entertainment arrangements depending on whether the destination is a resort destination in its own right or whether consumers may be interested in touring to attractions or experiences on offer. Nowhere in their offerings may you find anything like the highly specialised offerings of Martin Randall Travel such as high-end one-off classical concert events. Generally Martin Randall Travel's accommodation, dining and touring arrangements are up scale with no options for those on more modest budgets and for presumably demanding customers such as these the location of tickets at a concert may be a matter of concern. There is likely to be a far greater need for depth of information at a much more specialised level than the mass market offerings of Kuoni.

P4b: *The information required by travellers compiling their own arrangements from a range of independent service providers may be (i) larger in aggregate and (ii) vary in the need for independent sources based on the level of service standardisation and contribution to overall gratification from the travel experience*

In the case of those searching for independent modules or components to plan their own customised travel experience, a massively wider search requirement may be needed. A key factor in the quantum of the search and sources accessed may be the characteristics of the different components being sought. In the case of standardised transport arrangements like flights, hire cars or train travel the focus may be more on price options given the typically standardised nature of such travel with obvious exceptions in the case of luxury trains such as the Orient Express which is an experience as much as a mode of transport. For such standardised products, service providers are likely to be the primary source of information given the low impact on the gratification derived from travel. In other words, such products are a means to an end rather than an end in themselves. On the other hand; more experiential components such as accommodation, touring and entertainment options are likely to form the primary

gratification in the travel experience and be far more deeply investigated. As well as service providers, independent sources such as consumer travel press and books such as Lonely Planet guides and others relevant to the destination are likely to be used in a travel service provider evaluation process.

P5: *Critical elements of information search may relate to relatively simple factual material with a major potential impact on exclusion of options for evaluation*

In the current day and age, people may have greater needs for information on relative safety of different destinations. A review of travel advisories issued by the Australian Government (http://www.dfat.gov.au/travel/) on 29 March 2004 showed that over 70% of the 208 listed destinations had current travel advisories indicating personal hazard potential from high levels of crime, potential for terrorist acts or general political instability. Such a problem is likely to have an effect akin to Herzberg's (Herzberg, Mausner and Snyderman 1959) hygiene theory of motivation in effectively discounting the destination from consideration depending on the traveller's degree of risk adversity. In other words it is potentially a "deal breaker" with the potential to put an end to the purchase process for a given destination.

P6: *The internet may be a preferred medium for those seeking higher levels of information in their search processes*

It is interesting to note the finding in Ratchford, Lee and Talukdar's (2003) study that users of the internet for product search would have likely searched for more sources offline had the internet not been available to them. Whether this indicates a lesser need for cognitive closure (Mayseless and Kruglanski 1987) in people using the internet for product search is clearly not proven but may be an interesting study for the future. This contradicts Peterson and Merino's (2003 p 109) fourth proposition but may be preferred owing to the empirical nature of Ratchford, Lee and Talukdar's research.

Internet capabilities

The internet is, as stated by Peterson and Merino (2003 p100 footnote) "both a technical and conceptual phenomenon" and it is important to define the level at which it is being analysed. The intent of this paper is to focus on the conceptual in terms of the capabilities derived from digital networks of computing devices or appliances. Four primary capabilities are taken into account: (i) Digitisation of words, sounds and images, (ii) process automation, (iii) interactive communication and (iv) access to resources, facilities and other people through electronic networks.

Digitisation capabilities

The ability to digitise words, sounds and images is perhaps the simplest and best known of all capabilities. Desktop publishing software is available at low cost to enable the integration of words and images in an attractive arrangement by people with the requisite skills and these words and images are increasingly generated in digital form. Where they are not in digital form, low cost scanner hardware and software connected to a computing and storage device enable their conversion with a minimum of inconvenience. For audio visual material simple desktop computers increasingly have the ability to publish digital multimedia and even home users have the ability to digitise video and audio material from analogue forms. In summary therefore organisations have the potential to digitise all of their marketing materials with increasing ease and decreasing cost in line with Moore's Law (Hanson 2000 p 33).

Another major capability of information in digital form is the attachment of metatags relating to keywords in the content (Reedy and Schullo 2004 p 276). These metatags make information searchable in ways that have not been available before and are a major contributor to locating information in the massive amounts of content available online.

Once such material is made available online it also has the ability for real time updates to ensure currency of information. This effectively counters the problem with hardcopy information sheets and brochures that become dated and irrelevant as situations change with the passage of time.

Process automation

Process automation is a somewhat more complex application with the need for deep understanding of stimulus-response models in customer interaction and customised programming to implement (Bayne 2000 p285-301). In the context of customer needs for information, this would serve a primary purpose of being able to deliver the required information to a customer's specific request. There are a range of ways in which this may be effected but this paper's focus is more on the needs of customers than the processes used by businesses to organise information for customer consumption. It is therefore sufficient to note that information in digital form can be readily placed online and is easily findable by the use of search engines and search robots by consumers. Of greater importance is the satisfaction that results from the control that information seekers may derive from this self service mode of customer service (Reedy and Schullo 2004 p322). Apart from the convenience of being able to access information independent of time and place given the always-on and global nature of the physical network, there is an additional level of comfort for many in reducing their dependence on other people.

Interactive communication

One of the main drivers of process automation is interactivity that enables a stimulus-response sequence to happen in real time based on an exchange of information in real time. Interactivity is fundamental to any business activity and particularly crucial in the development of customer relationships (Mohammed et al. 2004 p392) where a large component of the requisite trust is based on mutual experience of interactions. Another major capability derives from the computing devices which enable the interactivity also having the ability to database the content of exchanges so that a clear picture of behaviour can be developed over time. Using either "cookies" or login processes (Siegel 2004 p 203) to identify individual machines or users interacting with a site, the site owner can develop a detailed profile of that person or machine (multiple users can be a complicating factor for cookies) over time. This profile gives an understanding of the person that provides potentially deep insights into customer needs to the level of enabling customised offerings. Customisation of offerings is an operational consideration that is beyond the scope of this paper but the ability to perhaps understand the stage an information seeker has reached and to point them toward appropriate resources for the next phase of their search is potentially valuable for organisations. Customising physical products like computers requires a very complex series of linkages such as that used by Dell computers (http://www.dell.com) to effect flexible manufacturing practices (Mohammed et al. 2004 p 543). In the case of travel providers who need to provide information to assist potential customers in their decision making, it is a lot simpler owing to the ability to digitise information. In essence the key point is the ability of customers to access information of their choice and, if there is a series of interactions over time, their interests can be identified and provided for based on the understanding resulting from the interactions. A classic example of an organisation doing this is Amazon.com (http://www.amazon.com) who typically point users of their website to information on products based on their previous interaction with the site.

Network connection access

The other major capability of the internet is its ability to connect people to resources (such as information) in many different places, facilities and other people of their choosing. The importance of this aspect has perhaps best been dealt with by Kevin Kelly (1997) in his characterisation of the "New Economy" as a "Network Economy" to build an understanding of the power derived from networked computing devices. His arguments for what he terms the laws of (i) plenitude, (ii) exponential value, (iii) increasing returns and (iv) inefficiencies all relate very closely to the changes in the basis of providing information or automating processes online. In most instances these represent the inverse of what might be regarded as rational thought and are highly counterintuitive in nature.

The power that can be developed by networking computer devices is perhaps most graphically shown in the use of a volunteer network of computers by the Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI). The only effective way they can analyse the vast amount of radio emissions from space is to network a large number of individual computers to gain the parallel processing power that can be derived from this. The applications for information provision are not as complex as SETI's network technologically but still significant nonetheless. There are a number of applications in which networks may add value for travel service providers in the form of co-operative communities. At the most obvious level the ability to provide network connections with single click access to complementary sources of information that may help fulfil a potential customer's information needs. This could include both independent

information sources (consumer travel press or guide books) as well as peer group interactions that may complement the information gathered from the service provider. This is a classic example of Kelly's (1997) law of plenitude where the availability of resources from other quality providers make the need to self produce such material redundant. Similarly, value may be delivered by information on complementary products to help the potential customer achieve their desired search results faster, ideally based on reciprocal links with trusted complementary products. Alternatively, at a peer-to-peer connection level interacting with groups that share a special interest areas may also help potential travellers with their information search. For example, a person wanting to take a skiing holiday may interact with groups of skiers online to gain a sense of the qualitative dimensions of the different skiing venues under consideration. This however is of greater relevance to the processing of information or the evaluation process that follows the information search.

Because of the ability to link to other organisations and sources online and effectively integrate their offerings into an organisation's information offering, another capability gained from network access is that of effectively outsourcing information provision. The benefits of specialisation from focussing on a core business are demonstrated in lower costs of production and higher levels of product quality. In the case of travel service providers links to third party sites such as www.lonelyplanet.com for providing destination information may deliver great benefits for their customers. As well as the higher level of credibility (discussed in greater depth under section 4 on customer needs) it effectively removes a level of information required from travel service providers. In theory this should free them up to develop better information sources about their travel offerings. Such independent information sources are plentiful; ranging from the databases of newspaper travel columns to the more specialised and greater depth with greater range of options offered by sites such as Lonely Planet.

Critical review of internet value adding ability

Having clarified the customer needs at the information gathering phase of the purchase process as well as the capabilities that the internet may offer by way of adding value, the paper now reviews the contribution made by the internet in this area in the interests of the customers. In doing so the paper makes the assumption that the customer's interest at this stage is to gather information that may enable an evaluation process and eventual choice of recreational travel experience.

P1: *A trusted source of information at service provider level is a key customer need*

The key question at this point is what level of trust can be built up online and the key consideration here must be the evidence that exists of trust being shown. Dann and Dann (2004 p336) detail major barriers to trust online as the lack of direct human interaction and the transitory nature of interaction online. Even the ability to interact with information providers online does not give the ability for interruption, feedback and learning as this is a characteristic of live voice communications only. Ultimately it may be an innate personality based characteristic within an individual person as suggested by Papadopoulou et al (2001) and this may be a key variable for marketers to identify online. This is likely to be a substantial challenge unless there is an extended period of interaction to get an understanding of the individual's behaviour, especially with the likely infrequency of purchase for such a high involvement indulgence based product.

Perhaps the greatest value adding potential on this point is the internet's ability to connect to independent sources of information which may be given a higher level of trust from being perceived as non-partisan. If a person seeking such information is offered links to such material online that may be seen as valuable in helping their information gathering efforts and hence be a source of value. This would require organisations to database all independent reviews of their service and establish the ability to link to the relevant URL. Given the turnover of material online and its propensity to be moved this requires a substantial effort to ensure that links provided are working and to change them when the information source changes their arrangement or configuration of information. It may help to highlight the independence of such information by making it clear to the information seeker that the new browser window that is about to be opened is at an independent site.

A decision to holiday on a Pacific Island resort for example requires decisions on "which island" and "which resort." Such resorts vary in character from hideaways to those with structured group activities for those looking for third party interaction. While the nature of the group activities (whether sport, nature or other special interest based)

themselves may be easy to search for online, the character of them is harder to ascertain from photo representations. Even multimedia representations may be ineffective if the consumer takes the view that content is staged for promotional purposes and therefore not truly representative of the experience. In this case the information is likely to be discounted and not used in the next phase of the buying process, the evaluation of options.

P2: *Personal recommendations are an important supplement to sponsor generated print and audio visual sources of information.*

In the physical world distribution channels of intermediaries a person is available to make recommendations to help a potential customer decide on appropriate information sources. As mentioned under customer needs the perceived independence of channel intermediaries like travel agents is a useful addition of credibility in this regard. In effect principals are not likely to gain any effect in this area since they are seen as a partisan or interested source of information. As much as one of the great interests of principals in interacting with customers over the internet may be disintermediation to cut down on the major expense area of commissions paid to intermediaries, it is important to understand the endorsement value that they bring. The issue for online intermediaries may be more in getting such recommendation from past users of their services, perhaps in an online community which information seekers could be given access to.

An alternative is to ensure that the service is well placed in independent information sources online. For example internet search engines and directories function as an independent reference source for online information searchers. These applications use network connections and ability to identify appropriate information metatags to direct a searcher to an appropriate site. It may also be that an online intermediary service could be more independent than a physical world intermediary. While the potential still exists for skews in searches for particular travel services based on commercial factors (differing commission rates and the like) the personal skews of physical world intermediaries are likely to be removed. Even commercial factors could be minimised given the huge amount of product that online intermediaries such as Expedia.com and Travelocity.com provide access to. While a review of their sites suggests higher levels of promotion of some operators and destinations than others it is not clear whether this is on a commercial arrangement or simply an advertising contract. Notwithstanding that promotion, there is a vast array of travel service options that they give access to, apparently free of any kind of bias, suggesting the potential for more objective information.

P3: *Discovery of options for travel experience fulfilment may be a significant part of information search needs*

The internet provides a vastly wider range of options for potential travellers. For example a person looking for an eco-tourism wildlife adventure in Africa has the option to browse the 30 distinctly different lodge experiences offered by the Conservation Corporation (www.conservationcorporation.co.za), the many different highly specialised offerings provided by Gametrackers (www.gametrackers.co.za) or any of many other highly regarded safari operators. By gaining an understanding of the range of options for themselves they may be better placed to set decision criteria knowing what the different available options are. This self service ability is regarded as adding value in terms of the control of the process that is gained by the customers seeking the information (Dann and Dann 2004 p61).

Perhaps the area that is lacking given the likely drive and expectation of people for more complete information is the ancillary products that may be a major source of gratification in a travel experience. In particular dining and shopping at foreign destinations are likely to be a major source of fulfilment for some travellers and these are not usually covered in any depth in online intermediary sites. Such information is available for seriously driven information seekers at the level of local government promotion or other specialised intermediary sites. For example a Google (www.google.com) search for "Singapore Restaurants" returned 1.25 million hits with an array of options ranging from individual sites for restaurants to groupings of restaurant types. These are both partisan or service provider sites as well as independent information sites so there is a large variance in objectivity of presentation as well as style for an information seeker to choose from.

P4: *Choice of purchase of travel arrangements in the form of an inclusive package or as independent components or modules is likely to affect both the nature and the quantum of the information search*

Internet capabilities of themselves are unlikely to influence a person's intent toward one of the other of these two choices. The logical argument that people may tend toward independent and unstructured arrangements based on the availability of far more information from electronic networks is effectively countered by the Lee and Lee's (2004) research which suggests that the potential for information overload may effectively drive people in the other direction. Perhaps Money and Crotts' (2001) explanation of national culture, choice of destination and composition of group may be the key determinants in this situation.

It is however interesting to note that package arrangement operators such as Kuoni and Martin Randall Travel do not seem to appear on online intermediary sites such as Expedia and Travelocity. While these online intermediaries do typically offer car, hotel and flight packages, they seem to be a compilation of independent arrangements from principal service providers rather than an arrangement prepared by a wholesale level intermediary like Kuoni.

P4a: *The nature of information required by travellers using inclusive package arrangements from a single source supplier may vary based on the level of specialisation of the arrangements*

There are a number of reasons why a person may choose to use inclusive rather than independent arrangements for their travel. These include (i) The time convenience of having all components compiled for them. (ii) Unavailability of the arrangements in any form other than packaged form, especially in the case of major events with tickets that carry a high premium. (iii) Concern for personal safety and need for a "comfort" factor from a reputable organisation offering inclusive arrangements.

For specialised arrangements the key internet capabilities are likely to be the search function that enables interested travellers to find information on providers of specialised travel arrangements. This can be achieved by including key words relating to the special interest subject matter in a web site as meta tags. Other keys to "findability" on the part of special interest package providers include ensuring that links are available from sites dealing with the special interest to the travel service provider's site. Such operators are less likely to be affected by Peterson and Merino's (2003) proposition that price focus may increase owing to the lack of competition and sometimes exclusivity of their offering. At a deeper level there is the potential for specialist operators in particular to leverage the interest driven (Dann and Dann 2004 p 41) nature of the internet. For example, an organisation offering specialised ecological wildlife experiences in Africa could provide information about their operations to people in online communities dealing with conservation issues.

For a generalist provider, like Kuoni, Peterson and Merino's (2003) proposition that price focus may increase and brand values decrease in buying decisions is an ominous portent. It certainly seems feasible that brand values will decrease in terms of the convenience value of being a one stop shop for a variety of components. Whether this will be equally so for the assurance value derived from the comfort of a reputable organisation making sensible recommendations for a seemingly dangerous destination requires validation.

P4b: *The information required by travellers compiling their own arrangements from a range of independent service providers is likely to be (i) larger in aggregate and (ii) vary in the need for independent sources based on the level of service standardisation and contribution to overall gratification from the travel experience*

For components such as flights that are a means to an end rather than an end in their own right, the ability to use search robots for price comparison is likely to be more effective. Even better is the potential to use reverse auctions if the buyer has little concern for their choice of airline or routing to get to their destination. For other components such as accommodation, activity suppliers and touring arrangements, which are the primary motivation for travel, the subjective and qualitative dimensions may again limit the effectiveness of such robots and reverse auctions.

Perhaps the key issue here may be the time required for searches of each and every component by the intending traveller. Notwithstanding the time and cost efficiency of searching the internet for options, this may be a less effective option in self service format than having a compilation of options prepared by an expert source.

The best potential to achieve this online for component purchasers could be development of a co-operative network of complementary products. This happens to a limited degree with the availability of links to airline sites from providers of ground content but there is very little apparent cooperation between complementary ground content providers. For example what other accommodation, touring and entertainment arrangements could be of interest to a person considering an African eco-tourism adventure? This would require development of a network of options provided by trusted providers based on an understanding of the profile of a person browsing relevant sites. At a simpler level, a guest house may account for no more than a few nights on a person's itinerary but a good source of value could be offering a referral service to other guest houses with similar standards and experience delivery goals. Kevin Kelly (1997) described the new economy in terms of the ability to offer network effects and the extraordinary benefits that may be gained by concentrating on connecting resources for customer benefits. In essence travel service providers should realise that they are unlikely to account for the end to end satisfaction of a recreational traveller's needs.

The ability to track user behaviour online by using cookies and/or login conditions to sites deliver desired content faster is a good one in theory but perhaps better suited to an online retailer such as Amazon.com. The single source ability of Amazon.com to track a person's tastes for books and music and other products that may be related, for example a person who has bought music by a particular composer may be interested in a new book published on the composer's work. Such capability online seems improbable given the multiple unrelated sources likely to be visited by a recreational travel information seeker.

Online intermediaries such as Travelocity effectively leverage their genesis as global reservations systems (American Airlines based Sabre in the case of Travelocity) as a means of extending interfaces beyond retail travel agents to end user consumers. It is interesting however that their arrangements are typically of the more standardised variety consisting primarily of airlines, chain hotels or global car rental companies. A search for local character or boutique type properties within the site would need to be performed to use such online intermediaries for other than international chain type properties.

An interesting qualification of online intermediaries is that their pricing, in the experience of the writer of this paper and anecdotal accounts from a variety of others, seems far from competitive. This is most surprising given the expectation of price sensitivity of people searching for information online. In addition the ability to search globally may lead to misunderstandings as in the case of a recent report in the Sydney Morning Herald of a person who booked a very attractively priced flight from Melbourne to London on Delta Airlines. Unfortunately for the traveller in Melbourne, Australia the booking was from Melbourne, Florida (Delta do not fly to Australia) and was priced in US Dollars which at the time were trading at a substantial premium to the Australian Dollar. Another person of the writer's acquaintance booked an airline ticket within Australia from an online site at what looked like a good price, only to find that the price had been quoted in British Pounds, resulting in a substantial premium being paid in the local currency.

P5: *Critical elements of information search is likely to relate to relatively simple factual material with a major potential impact on exclusion of options for evaluation*

As far as customers search for factual based information such as travel advisories in different countries, the internet provides perhaps the best means for updating, effectively removing a task of relative simplicity from travel consultants. The availability of authoritative factual information online cannot be added to by a travel consultant as it is, unlike much of the other information, factual in nature. In this area therefore it is feasible that a travel agents function can effectively be superseded by the internet for those with an inclination to use it.

P6: *The internet may be a preferred medium for those seeking higher levels of information in their search processes*

Peterson and Merino's (2003) proposition that decision making may tend toward dominance of cognition and away from the emotional drivers is particularly relevant to this point while bearing in mind their qualification that this only applies to those with willingness, ability and access to use the internet for information searches.

The lower effort costs of information online are clearly a great benefit to those seeking greater levels of information. The ability of Google, for example, to deliver 1.25 million links to options for Singapore restaurants in less than a quarter of a second demonstrates the massive ability of information delivery. The availability of information online may be seen as overwhelming although an ability to refine searches should markedly increase the relevance of the results delivered. Specifying cuisine by type or by country of origin is likely to deliver comprehensive information but in much more manageable form. It could also help with filtering out possibly unwanted information like expatriate restaurants in an exotic location; many visitors to Singapore, for example, would not actively seek an experience of "Genuine Aussie pub grub!"

Another issue is the preference that people may have for independent information sources for a non-partisan opinion in preference to the service provider's information. While Ratchford, Lee and Talukdar (2003) do suggest that the manufacturers are the primary source of information in their study, it is hard to extend that to travel services without further evidence. Note that much of the buying criteria for cars are based on demonstrable performance criteria combined with brand attitudes that may have been ingrained over time given our day-to-day exposure to the product. It seems unlikely that the same reliance may be placed on information from competing accommodation establishments on a Greek Island that is new to a potential buyer researching places to stay during their trip of a lifetime.

The solution to this problem is clearly the ability to link to independent sources. Apart from the value to the customers of a non-partisan independent information source this also enables the service provider to concentrate on the production of their service rather than web pages. As well as news and consumer travel press, there are great resources with specialist travel guides like the Lonely Planet, Fodor's, Frommer's and the like which offer online content.

Conclusions

The internet is sometimes seen as competing to add value against the traditional travel intermediary network or perhaps, more constructively, to complement it. It seems unlikely, for example that a person is likely to generate the sense of empathy from a website that may derive from interacting with a person in gathering information. In this sense positive brand values or destination choices are unlikely to flow from use of the internet on its own. The internet should rather be treated as a complementary medium in the sense that radio did not displace newspapers as a news medium and television did not in its turn displace radio. The key is understanding the situational factors in the use of the internet and also that it is far more than a communications medium so that its extensive network connections, interactivity and ability to automate processes are used to best effect.

Similarly, the senses of smell, touch and taste need to be supplemented beyond the internet's ability to deliver words, pictures and audio visual materials as a surrogate for the traditional promotional materials of brochures and videos.

There are some conclusions which may be drawn from this paper for members of the travel trade at both principal and intermediary level based on the needs of consumers searching for travel service provider information. Bear in mind that travel service provider principals may likely be seeking to interact directly with people who wish to compile an independent set of arrangements. Travel service intermediaries on the other hand cater for the needs of those seeking access to specialised arrangements or alternatively seeking convenience with a ready made package.

Principal travel service providers

Perhaps the first step is for principal travel service providers to gain a perspective of where they fit in the information seeker's plans. An airline for example is more likely to be seen as a means to an end rather than a end in itself and, as a result subject to higher levels of price scrutiny and competition. These products could perhaps be placed on a continuum ranging from facilitating services at one extreme to satisfaction fulfilment services at the other extreme. A resort accommodation provider or eco-tourism experience operator is far more likely to be the reason for the person travelling and because of the greater variety of options or means to satisfy a traveller's need, is likely to be less subject to price competition. British Airways have demonstrated that brand values do give some defence against price competition with their claim (Prokesch 1995) to have achieved a 5% pricing premium in the

mid 90's on transatlantic services, the toughest airfare market in the world. Note however that in the interview reported Sir Colin Marshal does say that pricing is still the primary issue in airline markets. For facilitation type services therefore aspects such as pricing and schedules are of primary importance.

The claims of organisations like Expedia of the success (BBC online 28 January 2002) that they are having in the market suggest that the volume through this channel is not one that principals can ignore. There are however a number of qualifications that apply to operators in this area detailed in the following section on online retail intermediaries. One of the great benefits that such online intermediaries give a principal is the ability to be linked with complementary service providers, enabling the information seeker to piece together an entire set of arrangements from a single source.

As an alternative, the independent component suppliers could band together through a programme of link exchanges between their web sites with trusted providers who are expected to deliver a reliable standard of customer experience. Ideally these links would enable an information seeker to access similar but not geographically competitive and/or complementary products in a form of referral mechanism that may facilitate information seeker search activity.

Perhaps most important of all, especially for the travel experience components that tend toward the travel experience fulfilment end of the continuum, qualitative factors may be very important. The potential for perceptions of partisan spin on information provided directly by service providers may make it important to provide access to independent sources. These may either be authoritative non-advocate sources or provide access to online communities that deal with topics directly relevant to the character of the service provided.

Intermediaries

The conclusions for intermediaries online are divided into two sections, firstly wholesale packagers who are service providers in their own right and secondly retail resellers of principal's products.

Wholesale Package resellers

The key consideration in this area is the degree of specialisation as information needs may differ based on customer motivation for seeking the service. For non-specialised services, such as Kuoni, the primary service provider interest may be support for their brand through advertising and maximising convenience for customers whose primary interests are convenience. Providing links to reviews of their product in trade or consumer press may be valuable support for claims of their ability to organise travel arrangements. The key benefit of such unspecialised packagers is their mass buying power of standardised arrangements to deliver an attractively priced service. As such they are not able to provide services that are specialised or customised to any great degree beyond providing a range of price choices for different levels of accommodation. In effect their customisation is limited to the adaptive customisation characterised by Hanson (2000 pg??) so information needs are likely to be less complex.

The more specialised service providers on the other hand have a power not based on economy but on ability to provide access to premium events or highly specialised travel arrangements. Their level of specialisation may enable them to offer a far greater degree of flexibility and customisation in the offerings that they make to their market. Given the typically premium nature of their product, it is reasonable to expect that the costs associated with building in the flexibility needed for this may be acceptable to a highly demanding market.

The high costs may however result in higher levels of information for travellers looking to minimise the risk of a major and often personally purchase. Online communities may be particularly useful given the typically special interest nature and presumably high levels of enthusiasm that people have in this area. It seems reasonable to assume that whether they are concert, sport, skiing or nature enthusiasts, if they are prepared to pay a premium for a travel experience related to their interest they may be happy interacting with such communities. A key benefit deriving out of this is the study of McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig (2002 p 39) that draws the conclusion that consumers mayingness to interact in communities relating to a brand effectively binds them to brand loyalty as with "hoops of steel."

Retail component resellers

It seems reasonable that people may shop for travel components individually through and online intermediary for one primary reason, cost and convenience. Organisations such as Expedia and Travelocity have the ability to offer a wide range of independent components and this perhaps satisfies the need for consumers in this area for convenience. It is a typical example of value adding by an intermediary in the form of assortment compilation (Vitale and Giglierano 2002 p 392) with the ability to compile a worldwide assortment through electronic networks.

One challenge that may be worth operators in this sector taking on is the potential to offer qualitative guides in differentiation of principals' products. This could be effected by collaborative filtering (Hanson 2000 pp 214-5) or a requirement for customers to indicate their interests as part of a registration process and at the same time enable psychographic segmentation. Once a profile was identified it would be possible to provide links to sources that fitted the values and interests of groups within the registered user database.

The main area that may need attention in this area is the issue of pricing which on anecdotal evidence seems to be well short of the competitive level that many seem to expect online. It is possible that airlines for example do not provide access to local market specials through the central reservations database or that they have some way of offering them directly to physical world distribution channels while denying them to a wider network. Apart from the apparent lack of competitiveness in pricing, there are also transparency issues with a need to clearly indicate the currency in which fares and charges are quoted. Alternatively, ensure that conversions to local currency are made once a person's point of origin for travel are known. Most sites seem to have currency converters so this simply requires building them into the quotations of prices and charges for services contracted.

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