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THE GROUP PURCHASING PROCESS: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE INFLUENCE OF THE FACILITATOR IN ALPINE TOURISM.

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ABSTRACT

Group travel is a common feature of all tourism markets and can vary from the familiar peer group/common purpose associations of the football and cricket followers to the non-familiar co-operative travel group of the under 35 year olds bus adventures throughout Europe. This study investigates the nature of social group travel in alpine tourism. It specifically examines the phenomena of the “group facilitator”; the person within the group who takes a major role in the travel decisions and organisation on behalf of all the other members in the travel party. The specific activities of this “group facilitator” and the role of opinion leadership, information search, organisation process, previous experience, relationship ties between the group members are examined. The ‘facilitator’ also influences other individuals’ decision to participate who delegate selection of destination to this person as well. The ‘facilitator’ has many of the characteristics of an opinion leader and was recognised by group participants as a major source of information about the destination. The findings of the study have important implications for tourism marketers as they highlight an opportunity to reach many potential travellers by directly targeting one key influencer and decision maker.

KEY WORDS: Leisure tourism, group travel, social group influence, group facilitator, opinion leadership, ski and alpine tourism.

INTRODUCTION

It has long been noted (Crompton 1981) that social and reference groups are extremely powerful sources of influence that serve to mould, modify and reinforce, the goals and motivations of their members. These social groups are interactive in nature, and an individual will usually belong to a great variety of them. In the context of tourist decision-making the social environment means that a potential tourist will choose a destination according to the norms and value systems held by their social reference group (Fodness and Murray 1999). For tourism marketing this can mean segmenting the tourist market on the basis of interactive social behaviour which utilises the nature of the impact of the social group and showing a typical choice pattern common to members of each group. Social groups have been recognised as enhancing or facilitating a pleasure vacation. This occurs because travelling in these social groups can save money, avoid loneliness, provide security, add additional educational
perspectives about a destination, and provide a sympathetic outlet for recalling and reminiscing about vacation experiences (Um and Crompton 1990).

This study builds and extends on the interpersonal communications that occur within social systems to introduce the behaviours that such communications can elicit. In tourism specifically, a few studies have supported the theory that buyers employ others as interpersonal sources of information, for support in their decision making processes and may even delegate the final purchase decision to a member of the social group.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interpersonal influence

Interpersonal influence describes the outside influence of other people, and the individuals that buyers use as sources of information form a diverse set and serve a variety of functions. The process of personal influence is seen to mediate mass media effects, with individuals having different propensities for relying on mass media or personal channels (Gatignon and Robertson 1985). In addition many first-time buying decisions are heavily influenced by someone else’s direct recommendation (Snepenger, Meged, Snelling and Worrall 1990). Interpersonal influence usually occurs in a face-to-face situation and is referred to as personal or social influence. Personal influence can be defined as the effect or change in a person’s attitude or behaviour as a result of communication with others. This influence maybe source or recipient initiated; communicated verbally or visually; and comprise of either one or two way influence (Lawson et al 1996). These reference groups can be any person or group that serves as a point of reference for an individual. They can be divided into five main categories; culture/subculture, reference groups, social classes, opinion leaders and the family (Morrison 1996). An additional typology is the distinction between formal and informal reference groups; formal being family and close friends and informal groups comprising of groups such as religious or work groups, or groups to which one pays a membership fee (eg. sporting club). However, the direct family is considered to be the most significant primary interpersonal influence on consumer behaviour (Morrison 1996).

The primary reference group has proven to have substantial influence on an individual’s tourist decision-making process. Price, Feick and Gusky (1995) found substantial evidence of the use of interpersonal influences, where 91% of respondents in their study reported they were likely to use knowledgeable spouses, relatives, friends, or acquaintances as information sources. These influences have also been found to be the most important in family vacation decision-making in contrast to the marketed advisory sources (eg. automobile clubs) and travel agencies' (Fodness and Murray 1999). Jackson, Schmierer and Nicol (1997) also found that the major reason for taking a trip and choosing the destination was the social influence from family, friends and relatives, and not the individual or the tourist industry. Indeed VFR (visiting friends and relatives) is a major proportion of the Australian Tourism Authorities survey results on travel purpose. Their study also indicated that critical aspect so if the trip eg when to go and for how long, depends more on family and friends than economics and pragmatics of the trip. These findings begin to suggest that the current tourism decision-making models fail to take into account the context in which the tourist related decisions are made.

Group influence

Social and reference groups studied in other purchase environments (eg. automobiles, property and durable whitegoods) are extremely powerful sources of influence that serve to establish, alter and reinforce, underlying pre-purchase motivations of its members. (Assael 2004). Within the traveller destination choice process three attribute dimensions can be used: (1) need satisfaction, (2) social agreement, and (3) travelability (Um and Crompton 1990). The social agreement aspect suggests a tourist’s potential to act in accordance with their social
groups’ opinions. This notion of social agreement was noted by Pearce (1982) and Snepenger et al. (1990) the latter proposing that tourists within the same social group were attracted to the same kind of destination because of the social image attached to the destination.

Opinion leadership is a part of social influence which researchers and theorists have considered as an important concept which has the potential to influence others' attitudes and how they behave (Morrison et al. 1996). However, literature on opinion leadership is constantly developing, with investigations into what characterises someone as an opinion leader. Some theorists emphasise knowledge as being the distinguishing factor in determining someone as an opinion leader (Assael 1987). However, Hawkins et al. (1994) noted that information transmission was a critical and significant underlying factor. A more complete description suggests a combination of knowledge, expertise and the ability to influence as characterising the opinion leader (Shiffman et al. 2001).

Opinion leadership is also considered to be a critical determinant of word-of-mouth communication that has an impact on the diffusion of new products, concepts, and services in tourism (Kotler et al. 2003). Of course, it is important to distinguish the concept of opinion leaders from the idea of market mavens. Mavens provide generalised information across many product categories, as opposed to an opinion leader whose influence is product specific (Neal et al. 2002 and Feick and Price 1987). Although some opinion leaders in tourism display this maven-like behaviour there are those who have specialised knowledge and information on different types of hospitality and travel services. These people tend to seek out and soak up more information on their 'speciality' area which can often be experience based (Morrison 1996). Hence, in tourism markets the opinion leaders are not general opinion leaders as they have detailed knowledge or expertise about a specific product or product class.

Consumers who have frequent contact with travel agents have been found to be more involved, more knowledgeable, and more likely to be opinion leaders than less frequent users. They were also found to make greater use of magazines, newspapers, books, television, and travel shows and are willing to learn about vacation travel (Goldsmith, Flynn, Bonn 1994). It is believed that this target segment of heavy users of travel agents will contain a higher proportion of opinion leaders to whom others, less frequent users, will come for advice (Goldsmith and Hofacker 1991).

Influences on the tourist decision making process

There are many influences on an individual's travel decisions including both internal and external factors to the individual, as well as the personal and impersonal factors that are at work on the decision process. Individual internal factors include characteristics such as personality, learning, motivation, perception and attitudes (Neal et al. 2002). External factors to the individual include influences from social interactions, personal experience (of visiting a destination) and marketing communications to which the individual is exposed (Morrison 1996).

External reference groups can be made up of both formal and informal groups, informal being family and close friends and informal groups can comprise of groups such as religious groups, work groups, or sporting groups (Morrison 1996). Reference groups can be categorised by their frequency of their contact to fall into either primary or secondary groups. Primary groups are ones which the person has regular contact, where as secondary groups are those which a person interacts inconsistently or on few occasions (Schiffman 2001 et al.). Tourism related social group activity can often fall into the latter category because of the typical
infrequency of travel. However, the strength of bonding to these groups can be high because of
the importance of the group cohesion to the ultimate goals of the travel activity (e.g. 4WD tours,
overseas skiing holidays).

Word of Mouth Communication

Word of mouth (WOM) has a particular bearing on the study to investigate if social
group travel organisers are contributing as a major source of information in travel decisions, and
if, through WOM communications actually influence the travel decision. Indeed other studies
of the hospitality and travel industry show it as one of the industries most dependent on word of
mouth information (WOM) (Morrison 1996, Kotler et al. 2003), thus it is vital for the tourism
marketer to understand the source of WOM communication and its influence on the tourist's
decision-making process. WOM information is considered to be one aspect of personal
influence that assists and enriches the communication process. Customers use WOM
recommendations to provide information and to support and reinforce their purchasing decisions
(Fill 1995). Three reasons have been given to explain the strength of WOM on consumer
decision making: (1) customers regard WOM as a reliable and trustworthy source of
information; (2) WOM can often come from personal contacts who can provide both social
support and approval in the purchase decision, and (3) recommendations provided through
WOM is often linked with social group pressure to force adherence with the information
provided (Neal et al 2002). This suggests that informal channels of information using WOM,
such as family, friends and reference groups, are at least as influential on the consumer’s
purchase decision as the formal channels of advertising, personal selling and sales promotion
(Middleton 2003).

Previous Destination Experience

The consumer decision-making process involves seeking information about a product
or brand from the individual’s memory, as well as from the external environment. Previous
experience of a destination can result in a tourist undertaking a limited external information
search as they already have a large amount of information from previous trips (Moutinho 1987).
Consequently, tourists place a higher reliance on information from past experiences rather than
information that was communicated from external sources. Morrison et al (1996) found that an
individual’s experiences, and the resultant generalisations from them, are weighted more
heavily than any new information received. This is due to the fact that as knowledge pertinent
to one’s key decision criteria is strengthened our need for new information is weakened.

Bettman and Whan Park (1980) found that consumers with low to moderate degrees of
prior experience and knowledge displayed high levels of attribute processing in the early stages
of the choice processes. Consumers with high levels of experience and knowledge did not
process much current information about the product; they relied on information in their memory
and their prior experiences. Individuals with limited experience and knowledge with a product
(or tourist destination), lack the ability to process the required information because they lack the
prior knowledge structures and dimensions. In addition to this it appears they also have limited
motivation to search for new information (Neal et al 2002). Basically because the information
search process will lack structure it is more difficult for these individuals to carry out. It is
therefore suggested that these individuals will find the delegation of the tourism decisions to a
facilitator, who is part of their social network, as a suitable way to help reduce the difficulty
associated with the information search process.

RESEARCH AIMS

The context for this research is the skiing industry. From the broader perspective the
ski industry in Australia is estimated to produce over $500 million in revenue from visitors to
the resorts located in Victoria and New South Wales. An estimated 1 million people visit the
snow fields each year (KPMG 2000) and over 2 million visits are made to the resorts in the
winter months (DSE 2004). Overall it is reported that 33% of the visitation (Tourism Victoria 2002) is in non-family/couple groups which includes such social categories as friends, work colleagues and informal social groups (Shaw 1997). In a study of new skiers conducted in 2003 a significant finding was that the triggers for a visit to the snow fields were socially based. Friends, relatives and partners were instrumental in organising the trip (Tourism Victoria 2003).

Their contribution to economic variability of the industry is extensive with estimates suggesting that a group of six persons are likely to spend nearly $900 per day on related activities such as food, accommodation, travel and equipment (DSE 2004). This indicates the importance of the economic multiplier that occurs when the group facilitator organises the group participants to make a visit to the snow fields.

Our current study investigates the process of social group travel organisation and specifically examines the relationship that occurs between facilitators of social group travel and participants in the travel. The role of opinion leadership, information search, organisation process, previous experience, relationship ties and visit-inhibitors to a destination are examined. The study also examines the form and process of relationships identified in the group development process including the identification of demographic influences and identifies if groups have a core group of participants. The research distinguishes roles played by the facilitator in the organisation process, the number of tasks undertaken by the facilitator and their influence in price negotiation for these tasks. A goal of the research is to recognise the influence of the facilitator in the choice of individuals to participate and choice of destination for the group and to differentiate between the level of expertise that the facilitator has in a variety of organizational tasks related to the group activity and the level of expertise of group participants.

METHODOLOGY

Since little research has been conducted into the influence of group facilitators from a tourism perspective, a ‘sequential mixed method design’ approach was employed (Tashakori and Teddlie 1989). When using ‘sequential mixed method designs, the researcher conducts a qualitative phase of a study and then a separate quantitative phase, or vice versa’ (Tashakkori & Teddlie 1989, p.46). The first stage of the research process, qualitative research, took the form of a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews. Both the facilitators of the group travel and a participant in each group were interviewed. The aim of the exploratory research was to confirm the relationship between the group facilitator and the group member, and the process that is involved between the two individuals in organising and participating in the social group travel. Specifically, the most significant variables that impact on the relationship were identified, in order for them to be tested in the descriptive research. Ten (10) in-depth interviews in total, including 5 with group facilitators and 5 with group members. The second stage of the research involved a multiple cross-sectional descriptive study.

The target populations were (1) organisers of a current social group trip, and (2) a group member who participated in the organised travel. The social group must include a social group of friends, and single families, school groups or professional organised tour groups were excluded. Using a sample frame 70 accommodation houses at the Mt Hotham ski resort 150 completed questionnaires were obtained from 75 group facilitators and 75 group members. Each group organiser was paired with at least one of their group members.

The facilitator questionnaire consisted of 16 close-ended questions relating to the group travel, 6 questions of an opinion leadership scale, and 4 questions covering background information. The participant questionnaire consisted of 19 close-ended questions, 6 opinion leadership scale questions and 4 questions relating to background information. The data obtained in this study involved a comparison of variables between the facilitator and participant. These results were compared using T-Tests, Chi-Square analysis and ANOVA. After data
collection the total sample size was reduced from 150 to 130 people who provided complete and useable responses, this including 65 organisers and 65 participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A discussion of results relating to the relationships within the group, the existence of a core social travel group, alternative destinations and demographic details is provided below.

Qualitative Phase

The results obtained from the 10 in-depth interviews indicated that there typically was a person in social travel groups who took on the majority of the organisation of the trip for the entire group. It was evident that this organiser for the group plays a significant role in the management of the ski trip. In the five groups studied, the organiser was found to play a dominant role in initiating the trip, deciding the destination of the trip, and making a substantial contribution to the overall organisation of the trip including booking accommodation, arranging transport and organising food. It was clear that this role was more than providing information (in the manner of an opinion leader) but involved taking on specific actions and provides a locus of control to which other group members delegated many of the key decisions. We formulated the term FACILITATOR to capture the special nature of the group member’s role in making the trip happen and to be successful.

Quantitative Phase

The size of the travel groups ranged from 3 people to as large as 27 people. The mean size of the travel group was 8 people, and 60% of the travel groups were made up of seven or less people. Within the travel groups the facilitators identified a number of relationships (Table 1). School friends, work colleagues and university friends were the most frequent relationships; sporting clubs also represented a popular travel group.

Table 1. Relationships identified in the group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship Type</th>
<th>N=65</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School friends</td>
<td>33.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University friends</td>
<td>29.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Colleagues</td>
<td>33.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sporting Club</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>35.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Multiple Response

Table 2. Sex of Facilitator and Participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Facilitator</th>
<th>Participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>N=65 (%)</td>
<td>N=65 (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
<td>52.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
<td>47.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results show that typical facilitator is male (61.5%), and the sex of the participants appeared to be more evenly spread between male and female. As many of the social groups are comprised of couples this is not a surprising result.

Identified Core Group

Respondents were asked if there was an active core group within the larger, current travel group. These core group members are those who had previously travelled together. Of
the 130 respondents, 92.3% acknowledged the existence of a core group. This suggests that within a large travel group there exists a more closely-knit key group of people who find other participants or allow the facilitator to invite others to join. For the 60 facilitators who acknowledged a core group the numerical size of varied from 2 to 22 people. The mean size of the core group was 5. Members of the core group acknowledged they had travelled to more than one destination on previous occasions; this included other mountains, beaches and interstate travel.

Table 3. Roles Played by Facilitator in the Organisation Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation Task</th>
<th>Facilitator N=65</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Booked Accommodation</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organised Transport</td>
<td>73.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organised Food</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organised Car chains</td>
<td>47.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organised Lift Passes</td>
<td>27.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organised Ski equipment/clothing</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Multiple Response Question

Together with booking accommodation, a large proportion of the facilitators undertook the task of organising transportation, food and car chains for the travel group. The average number of tasks undertaken by the facilitator was identified and produced in the following table.

Table 4. Number of Tasks Undertaken by the Facilitator

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Organisation Tasks</th>
<th>Facilitator N=65</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>32.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number of tasks undertaken by the facilitator ranged from 1 to 6. On average they undertook 3 tasks in the organisation process, with 76.9% of the facilitators conducting 3 or more of the organisation tasks. The role of the facilitator in price negotiation for the travel group is identified in the following table.

Table 5. Price Negotiation by the Facilitator

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation Task</th>
<th>Facilitator N=65</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>70.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
<td>36.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Car Chains</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lift Pass</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ski Equipment/Clothing</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Multiple Response Question

It is evident that the facilitator did play a part in negotiating the prices for the group. Accommodation and Transport were the two significant tasks where this occurred, in 70.8% and
36.9% of the groups. Price negotiation for Car Chains (12.3%) and Lift Passes (10.8%) was also a task undertaken by facilitators. Both the facilitator and the participant were asked to indicate who chose the destination for the group. The results were as follows:

Table 6. Destination Decision for the Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination Decision</th>
<th>Facilitator &amp; Participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N=130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Organiser</td>
<td>60.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Decision</td>
<td>32.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One other group member</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-group decision</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The facilitator was found to dominate the destination decisions, with 60.8% making this decision for the group.

Table 7. Facilitator Influenced Participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence by the Facilitator</th>
<th>Facilitator</th>
<th>Participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N=65</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>72.3%</td>
<td>66.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>27.7%</td>
<td>33.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi Square Significance =.000  Significance =.009

The results (Table 7) showed that both the facilitators and participants acknowledged that the facilitator influences on the participant’s decision to go on the trip. In fact, 66.3% of the participants and 73.3% of the facilitators believed social influence occurred in the relationship and was a feature in the decision-making process.

Expertise of the Facilitator

Both the facilitator and the participant rated their expertise for each of the organisation tasks identified in visiting a ski resort. The following table contains a comparison of the mean scores of each.

Table 8. Comparison of Expertise Rating: Facilitator and Participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation Task</th>
<th>Facilitator (65)</th>
<th>Participant (65)</th>
<th>T-Test</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Booked Accommodation</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organised Transport</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organised Food</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>.696</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organised Car chains</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organised Lift Passes</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>.069</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organised Ski equipment/clothing</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The expertise rating by the facilitator was consistently higher than the participant’s rating for each of the organisation tasks. The mean expertise score for the facilitator was 7.7, while the mean for the participant was 6.6. The results showed that the difference in the mean scores was statistically significant for all the organisation tasks except the organisation of food and lift/ski passes which involve some more personal decisions in the context of a skiing holiday.
CONCLUSION
Implications for Tourism Marketing

The informal process of interpersonal influence has been found to mediate mass media effects (Gatignon and Robertson 1985). Together with the results of this study, it is vital for the tourism marketer to consider the process of interpersonal influence on tourist decision making. The findings of the study highlighted several implications for tourism marketers in the pleasure/leisure segment of the market. The implications addressed are in areas of understanding individual interpersonal influence and the possibility of refining target marketing to identify these key influencers was discussed in the literature review, social influences are one of the most powerful sources of influence on the tourist decision making process (Morrison 1996, Nolan 1976, Jackson, Schmierer, Nicol 1997). While the decision making processes within the family has received significant research attention, the operation of internal social influences in wider social groups such as work associates, friends and peer groups has not been investigated to the same degree (Mansfeld 1992).

In this study the reliance by the social group on internal information sources was evident and suggests that informal social travel groups may rely more heavily on internal information sources than external ones. This is the first role that the social travel group organiser takes on and the findings suggest that they are the high information seekers within the group. In addition this study highlights the role of the group travel facilitator. Although this group leader takes on many aspects of the opinion leader they are also involved in key decisions and key actions. On behalf of their group these facilitators will search out the best destinations, find the best prices, make recommendations, and make decisions on behalf of the other group members. In addition, the travel experience for the group participant is made simpler and many of the complexities of tourist travel are removed by their delegation of the organisation to a trustworthy member of the social network. This also suggests that tourism marketers need to focus their promotional campaigns on group opinion leaders, high information seekers as well as the travel group facilitators in the leisure segment. The campaign would need to promote group travel as well as inform the individual about the tourist destination including activities and attractions at the destination while taking into account these people are knowledgeable and experienced travellers. The facilitators appear to undertake the external information search on behalf of their travel group. Tourism marketers should make it easy for them to obtain information about the destination, through 1800 telephone numbers, Internet sites and travel brochures. Further to this the marketers should package their products and services to cater for larger, social groups of people.

Target Marketing

The results of this study suggest that targeting of the key decision-makers in the travel purchase decision could provide a useful way for marketers to optimise their promotional dollar.

Well established segments in the pleasure travel such as family travel, have received a high degree of marketing attention but the pleasure segment needs to be further developed to include a specific segment for social group travel. Further investigation is needed into the segment. Tourism marketers need to concentrate their promotion, product and pricing towards the social groups and tailor their product and services to the needs and wants of these travel groups.

To make the travel organisation easier for the facilitator, operators should package the holiday; for example, include accommodation, transport and a destination activity all in the one price. This would make the job of the travel facilitator easier and may prompt them to initiate much more actively the organisation of a trip. Adding special communication facilities through
email and Internet that target these people and offer particular loyalty benefits for the organiser is an additional possibility.

Limitations

As discovered in the review of the literature, research into social group travel in the pleasure vacation segment has not been addressed to any great extent. This presented a limitation to the researchers as little prior theory was available on which to base the design of this investigation. In this sense the current study must be regarded as exploratory, as it needed to identify the significant variables, which impacted on the relationship between the social group facilitator and the group member.

Further limitations of the research study were the small sample size obtained in both the qualitative and quantitative analysis and that only the participants of the social group trip were investigated. This study could not provide a contrast to the segment of the market that make their own travel decisions and travel alone, in couples or in family groups.

The use of one tourism context, namely the ski industry as the basis for this research begs the question about its generalisability of the findings to other tourism orientated activities.

Directions for Future Research

From an analysis of the travel marketing literature, several areas for future research are evident. The concept of informal social group travel has received only limited research attention and requires extensive investigation to understand the fundamental variables, which make up social group travel. This research only investigated a few of the elements in a specific area of social group travel, which involved one person taking on the responsibility of the organisation for the entire group. Further research is justified as it will lead to further understanding of this segment. Investigation into the process of social group travel organisation in all segments of the market, including temporal segments (e.g. summer), destination (e.g. interstate, and overseas travel) as well as for demographic groups (e.g. different age groups) would be useful. Further characterisation of the social group facilitator, including identification of personality types, would allow tourism marketers to target them more effectively. In addition the psychological aspects of the facilitators' motivations for taking on the responsibility of organising the trip and the reasons for the group members delegating such important decisions should be more clearly understood.

From a perspective of the general theories around opinion-leadership we believe that this study suggests that an extension to the opinion-leadership scale is possible. Because the Group Facilitator tends to possess all the properties associated with being an opinion-leader we believe that there is an opportunity to expand the measures of opinion-leadership to include a score for the level of active contribution the person takes on by decision-making and organising on behalf of those who have been influenced by their opinion-leadership position in the social group.

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