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Use of a Travel Magazine as a Tourism Information Source

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ABSTRACT

One of the major factors influencing consumer decisions to purchase a product or service is information sources about the product or service. Information search or information seeking is the process of consulting various sources before making a purchasing decision. While the effect of tourism promotion efforts on travel decisions is fairly well researched, the influence of more informal information sources such as magazines has not been investigated to any great extent. The purpose of this research was to help determine the effects of a travel magazine on travel decisions and behavior, and extend tourism information search research especially with respect to magazines as information sources. A mail survey of Arizona Highways Magazine subscribers was used to further investigate the nature of travel magazines as information sources. It is clear from this study that a travel magazine such as Arizona Highways is an important and influential source of information for travelers whether they are in their own area or visiting from farther away. The magazine not only had influence on interest in traveling in Arizona in general, but also on decisions related to specific destination and activity selection.

INTRODUCTION

Gaining a better understanding of tourist decision making is a long standing goal of tourism researchers and practitioners. As well, in the post September 11 environment and with increasing gasoline prices, more thoroughly investigating the nature of resident travel in addition to travel by nonresidents of a particular state, province or country, has become increasingly important as some travelers stay closer to home. The process of consumer behavior encompasses several stages: searching for information, purchasing a product or service, using a product, evaluating a product, and disposing of the product or service (Moutinho 1987). One of the major factors influencing consumer decisions to purchase a product or service is information sources about the product or service. *Information search or information seeking* is the process of consulting various sources before making a purchasing decision. Consumers recognize the need for more knowledge, which activates the decision to search for information about alternatives (Moutinho 1987). Many studies have considered traveler use of destination information, most of which have focused exclusively on longer distance travelers. As well, it is often assumed that travel oriented publications such as travel magazines have substantial effects on people's decisions to travel to particular destinations. However, while the effect of tourism promotion efforts on travel decisions is fairly well researched, the influence of more informal information sources such as magazines has not been investigated to any great extent. The purpose of this research is to help determine the effects of a travel magazine on travel decisions and behavior, and extend tourism information search research especially with respect to magazines as

information sources. The study specifically considers the effect of *Arizona Highways Magazine (AHM)* on tourism in Arizona looking at travel by both residents and those from out of state.

Consumers search for information to help them reduce the risk of purchasing products or services. There is evidence that services, such as travel products, are perceived as riskier purchases than goods (Murray 1991; Zeithaml 1981). The combination of using multiple information sources by travelers has been called “information search strategies” (Snepenger and Snepenger 1993). Information search strategies vary greatly. Researchers have shown how different types and numbers of sources are used depending on trip goals and information needs. Little research specifically considers the influence of magazine and/or newspaper publicity on people’s travel decisions. It seems that magazines as information sources are used by some segments of the traveling public. Fodness and Murray (1998) found that nearly 15% of the respondents in their sample of welcome center visitors used magazines as an information source while Gitelson and Crompton (1983) found 14% of welcome center visitors used travel magazines and 10% used other magazines. As well, Andereck and Caldwell (1993), Capella and Greco (1987) and Henshall, Roberts and Leighton (1985) all found magazines rated as an “important” information source.

Fodness and Murray (1998) found a clear division of magazines and newspapers as information sources distinct from all other sources investigated in their study. They also found a small but distinct cluster of travelers who were the heaviest users of magazines and/or newspapers as contributory information sources. They suggested the reason for this is magazines and newspapers are used in ongoing rather than shorter term prepurchase information searches. Travelers who use magazines and/or newspapers to plan a trip acquire their information on a regular basis regardless of an impending purchase (Bloch, Sherrell and Ridegeway 1986). The other cluster that used magazines fairly extensively in Fodness and Murray’s study was made up of travelers who used a mix of several contributory information sources. Many people tend to use magazines in conjunction with several other external information sources, especially using friends/relatives, highway information centers, and automobile clubs, that provide more specific and detailed information such as where to stay and where to eat.

The nature of travel magazines such as *AHM* differs somewhat from many other travel information sources. They are obviously external sources of information, but unlike sources often used for prepurchase decisions, they are ongoing information sources in that people read them on a regular basis whether or not a trip is imminent. Ongoing search takes place for two reasons: to create a knowledge base for future decision making or for the satisfaction of the search activity in and of itself (Bloch et al., 1986; Fodness and Murray, 1998). Vogt and Fesenmaier (1998) found evidence that ongoing information search occurs because consumers have information needs that go beyond the functional or simply to gain needed knowledge. One of these, hedonic, is the perspective which suggests information search can be a pleasurable leisure experience itself. Another, aesthetic, views information as a stimulus to visual thinking, imagery, and envisioning of a place that is real and obtainable. These aspects of information search seem especially pertinent to a travel magazine.

METHODS

The questionnaire used in this study was designed to measure the effect of *AHM* on travel in Arizona for both residents and out of state visitors. The questionnaires for the two groups were very slightly different to be appropriate for the different types of travelers. They included

questions related to recent travel within the state, including day trips for residents, as well as a number of questions about the most recent trip for all respondents who had traveled in the state. There were also several questions about the effect of the magazine on travel both in general and with respect to specific types of travel decisions.

The data collection phase of this study involved a geographically stratified random sample. The number of subscribers surveyed corresponded to the proportion of in state (40%) versus out of state (60%) subscribers. One mail survey was administered to a sample of 811 in state *AHM* subscribers and was further stratified by self-subscriptions (n=610) versus gift subscriptions (n=201). A second mail survey was administered to 1,200 out of state *AHM* subscribers, also stratified according to self (n=604) versus gift (n=596) subscriptions. An initial mailing that provided a questionnaire, a cover letter, and a postage-paid reply envelope was sent to the samples. This was followed by added mailings to non-respondents including a post card and a second survey packet to increase sample size. Arizona subscribers had a response rate of 56% (n=436), out of state subscribers had a response rate of 52% (n=612). Data were analyzed using frequencies and chi-square tests to test for various differences between out of state subscribers and in state subscribers who had been on a trip of more than one day. Regression analysis was used to determine the influence of length of time of subscriptions on several variables.

RESULTS

Several questions were posed to respondents regarding the manner in which *AHM* influenced their travel decisions and behavior. A very large percentage (81%) indicated the magazine had moderately to greatly increased their interest in Arizona as a vacation destination, with out of state subscribers (OSS) being more heavily influenced than in state subscribers (ISS) (Table 1). They also felt *AHM* is very helpful with respect to travel planning, with OSS and ISS being equally likely to find the magazine helpful (Table 1). Quite a high percentage of respondents keep their *AHMs* for use as a travel information source at a later date, with ISS being more likely to keep their magazines (Table 1). Many subscribers share their magazines with other people (Table 1), spreading the potential influence of the magazine on travel behavior to others.

A moderate percentage of both ISS (41%) and OSS (35%) indicated *AHM* directly influenced them to take the most recent trip within the state or include Arizona in their travel plans, respectively (Table 2). *AHM* subscribers also reported that the magazine was most influential on their decisions to visit specific attractions or destinations (61% moderately to very influential), as well as to choose Arizona as a primary destination (44% moderately to very influential) (Table 3). The two groups were similarly influenced. Subscribers also used the magazine to select travel routes in the state with out of state subscribers more heavily influenced (47% vs. 35%). About a quarter of respondents from both groups made these types of decisions directly as a result of *AHM*.

Table 1. Interest Differences Between Residents and Out of State Visitors

Variables	Column Percents		Chi-Squared	p
	Residents	Out-of-state		
Increased interest (n=1001)				
Not increased	3.8	7.7	16.0	.00
Slightly increased	12.7	12.7		
Moderately increased	39.7	29.3		
Greatly increased	43.8	50.3		
Helpfulness (n=1010)				
Not helpful	0.0	0.3	1.7	.64
Slightly helpful	8.1	7.4		
Moderately helpful	30.1	29.4		
Very helpful	61.7	62.8		
Keep (n=1013)				
Yes	82.6	6.8	5.0	.03
No	17.4	23.2		
Share (n=1017)				
Yes	80.3	79.7	0.1	.82
No	19.7	20.3		

Table 2. Influence of Magazine on Travel Plans

Variables	Column Percents		Chi-Squared	p
	Residents	Out-of-state		
Include AZ in travel plans (n=857)				
Yes	38.1	35.5	0.6	.44
No	61.9	64.5		
Additional time on trip (n=857)				
Yes	9.5	10.9	0.5	.50
No	90.5	89.1		
AZ as a primary destination (n=783)				
Not influential	35.5	40.6	5.2	.16
Slightly influential	16.6	17.3		
Moderately influential	28.9	22.0		
Very influential	19.0	20.2		
Specific attractions/destinations (n=795)				
Not influential	27.1	22.7	2.0	.58
Slightly influential	14.3	14.8		
Moderately influential	28.6	30.7		
Very influential	30.1	31.8		

Table 3. Influence of Magazine on Specific Travel Decisions

Variables	Column Percents		Chi-Squared	p
	Residents	Out-of-state		
Made decisions due to magazine				
Yes	25.7	25.5	0.0	.95
No	74.3	74.5		
Special events/festivals (n=754)				
Not influential	49.4	44.1	3.2	.37
Slightly influential	18.5	22.0		
Moderately influential	17.2	20.0		
Very influential	15.0	13.9		
Specific rec./enter. activities (n=795)				
Not influential	47.4	42.0	2.8	.42
Slightly influential	19.9	21.1		
Moderately influential	20.6	25.0		
Very influential	12.1	11.9		
A specific tour (n=748)				
Not influential	56.9	51.5	2.5	.49
Slightly influential	16.4	18.3		
Moderately influential	14.1	17.2		
Very influential	12.5	13.0		
Travel routes (n=734)				
Not influential	46.7	34.5	21.1	.00
Slightly influential	8.9	19.4		
Moderately influential	22.3	26.6		
Very influential	22.0	19.4		
Camping areas/facilities (n=732)				
Not influential	67.1	69.2	1.2	.75
Slightly influential	12.8	13.3		
Moderately influential	9.5	9.3		
Very influential	10.5	8.2		
Rec. activities on a specific trail (n=730)				
Not influential	67.1	67.4	0.1	.99
Slightly influential	14.0	13.3		
Moderately influential	10.3	11.0		
Very influential	8.6	8.4		
Other accommodations (n=705)				
Not influential	62.4	57.3	7.3	.06
Slightly influential	16.9	20.0		
Moderately influential	14.6	19.5		
Very influential	6.1	3.2		
Shopping areas/facilities (n=722)				
Not influential	60.0	56.0	2.7	.44
Slightly influential	18.0	18.7		
Moderately influential	13.6	17.8		
Very influential	8.5	7.5		

Respondents were also asked questions about the influence of specific components of the magazine on travel decisions and helpfulness for travel planning. The photographs in *AHM* most strongly influenced travel decisions and were also considered quite helpful to respondents' trip planning (Tables 4 and 5). This was followed by feature stories, the "Destination" section which generally focuses on a specific attraction, and the "Back Road Adventure" section which generally focuses on rural scenic drives or out of the way destinations. The two subscriber groups did not differ with respect to their evaluation of most of the components, though ISS tended to find the "Destination" section more helpful than did the OSS.

Table 4. Influence of Magazine Components

Variables	Column Percents		Chi-Squared	p
	Residents	Out-of-state		
Feature stories (n=954)				
Not influential	4.2	7.1	3.9	.28
Slightly influential	19.5	18.8		
Moderately influential	41.6	42.5		
Very influential	34.7	31.6		
Photographs (n=976)				
Not influential	1.7	3.5	6.2	.10
Slightly influential	7.1	7.7		
Moderately influential	30.1	24.5		
Very influential	61.0	64.3		
“Taking the Off-Ramp” section (n=879)				
Not influential	8.6	12.6	5.7	.13
Slightly influential	28.6	23.2		
Moderately influential	40.5	41.1		
Very influential	22.2	23.2		
“Destination” section (n=912)				
Not influential	4.7	8.1	9.3	.03
Slightly influential	20.6	15.7		
Moderately influential	47.7	44.1		
Very influential	27.1	32.0		
“Along the Way” section (n=906)				
Not influential	4.5	9.7	13.2	.00
Slightly influential	26.2	20.4		
Moderately influential	47.5	44.4		
Very influential	21.8	25.5		
“Back Road Adventure” section (n=930)				
Not influential	10.7	11.2	1.4	.71
Slightly influential	17.9	16.7		
Moderately influential	37.2	34.6		
Very influential	34.2	37.5		
“Hike of the Month” section (n=905)				
Not influential	26.4	29.1	0.9	.82
Slightly influential	23.8	23.1		
Moderately influential	26.7	26.6		
Very influential	23.0	21.2		

Table 5. Helpfulness of Magazine Components

Variables	Column Percents		Chi-Squared	p
	Residents	Out-of-state		
Feature stories (n=920)				
Not helpful	5.6	10.8	8.0	.05
Slightly helpful	24.2	23.0		
Moderately helpful	40.7	37.4		
Very helpful	29.5	28.8		
Photographs (n=926)				
Not helpful	6.0	9.7	6.3	.10
Slightly helpful	17.6	14.0		
Moderately helpful	30.7	28.2		
Very helpful	45.7	48.1		
“Taking the Off-Ramp” section (n=871)				
Not helpful	8.7	14.3	11.0	.01
Slightly helpful	30.7	23.5		
Moderately helpful	41.6	40.0		
Very helpful	19.0	22.3		
“Destination” section (n=888)				
Not helpful	5.2	10.9	10.2	.02
Slightly helpful	21.4	20.4		
Moderately helpful	45.2	39.4		
Very helpful	28.2	29.3		
“Along the Way” section (n=881)				
Not helpful	6.9	12.3	8.2	.04
Slightly helpful	27.2	24.5		
Moderately helpful	43.2	38.5		
Very helpful	22.7	24.7		
“Back Road Adventure” section (n=891)				
Not helpful	12.6	15.5	3.5	.32
Slightly helpful	20.5	23.5		
Moderately helpful	34.7	30.3		
Very helpful	32.1	30.7		
“Hike of the Month” section (n=867)				
Not helpful	28.1	30.2	3.3	.34
Slightly helpful	23.2	25.6		
Moderately helpful	24.8	25.2		
Very helpful	24.0	19.0		

Bivariate regression analysis was conducted to determine the influence of length of subscription, measured by number of years, on evaluation of the magazine. There was a significant relationship between number of years holding a subscription to *AHM* and the extent to which the magazine had increased interest in Arizona as a travel destination, with longer time subscribers noting a greater interest increase ($F=10.0$, $R^2=.01$ $p<.00$). A similar relationship existed between subscription length and rating of *AHM* as a source of information, again with

longer time subscribers finding it more helpful ($F=7.7$, $R^2=.01$ $p<.00$). No other relationships were statistically significant.

Finally, other information sources were used in conjunction with *AHM*. In particular, friends and relatives and auto clubs were most frequently used along with the magazine. Specifically, 48% also used friends and relatives and 25% used auto clubs.

APPLICATION AND CONCLUSIONS

Though information sources such as advertisements, state or local travel information fulfillment pieces, brochures, and welcome centers have been frequently studied, travel magazines have received little consideration. It is clear from this study that a travel magazine such as *Arizona Highways* is an important and influential source of information for visitors whether they are traveling in their own area or visiting from farther away. The magazine not only had influence on interest in traveling in Arizona in general, but also on decisions related to specific destination and activity selection. As reported in other research, the magazine was one of a variety of information sources used by most respondents (Snepenger and Snepenger 1993). While *AHM* is an important component of travelers' information search strategies and was very influential on travelers' decisions and behavior, similar to the results reported by Fodness and Murray (1998), *AHM* was most often used in conjunction with other information sources, especially friends/relatives and automobile clubs. It seems likely that these other sources provide some of the specific information travelers may need such as accommodations information.

The study confirms that some types of information such as magazines are ongoing information sources (Bloch et al. 1986; Fodness and Murray 1998). Because so many subscribers retain their magazines to use later, the magazines are widely available for use prior to a trip but they have been read on a continuing basis. As well, longer-time subscribers noted higher levels of influence of the magazine and found it more helpful than those who had been subscribers for less time suggesting as ongoing search continues interest in a destination grows and readers gain added information that can be helpful when making travel decisions.

The high levels of influence and perceived helpfulness of photographs in the magazine on travel decisions is interesting. *AHM* is particularly known for its beautiful photographs and publishes work by several well known photographers. The importance of the photographs in influencing travelers supports Vogt and Fesenmaier's (1998) contention that there is an aesthetic component to ongoing information search, and that travelers use information to imagine the destination. It also points to the need for identification of photographs (i.e., what the photo is and where it was taken) as they can be very influential on visitors' decision making. Tourists want to visit the places they see in photographs.

Though it might be expected that a magazine such as *Arizona Highways* would have greater influence on nonresidents who are less familiar and knowledgeable about the state, this study suggests residents are also highly influenced by the magazine. Out of state subscribers noted a somewhat higher destination interest increase in general, but the groups did not differ with respect to the influence of the magazine on travel plans as they were equally likely to take a trip, spend more time, and pick a specific attraction or specific destination as a result of the magazine. The primary notable difference is the selection of travel routes with nonresidents somewhat more likely to use this kind of information. Another difference is the somewhat higher propensity of residents to keep their magazines, perhaps perceiving more possible future use than out of state subscribers, though a remarkable percentage of nonresidents keep them as well.

From a practical perspective, destinations or attractions wishing to attract added visitors would be well served by being the subject of a feature story or a monthly column in a travel magazine that is presented along with high quality photographs. This seems to be especially true for less well known and/or more remote destinations that may appeal to a magazine reader who likely is predisposed to unique travel experiences. Readers use information in a magazine to make decisions and it is the features and photos that have the most impact.

This study has found evidence that a travel magazine can be quite influential on travel decisions and subscribers find it helpful when planning their trips, however further research is needed. This study investigated the influence of only one magazine, and one that focuses only one state within the U.S. It is very likely that subscribers to *AHM* are product involved, are already fairly interested in travel in Arizona, and thus are easily influenced. The impact that more general travel magazines such as *National Geographic Traveler* or *Travel Holiday* have on travel decisions would be a valuable addition to the tourism literature.

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