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Lee, Woojin; Yoo, Kyung Hyan; and Gretzel, Ulrike PhD, "EFFECTIVENESS OF COMMUNITY-BASED VISITOR INFORMATION CENTERS" (2016). *Travel and Tourism Research Association: Advancing Tourism Research Globally*. 58.
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Effectiveness of Community-Based Visitor Information Centers

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study presented in this paper was to identify differences in VIC users between highway and community-based locations. Also, rather than simply identifying differences in VIC users, effects on several travel-related behaviors were measured. The findings indicate that visitors of community-based centers are more likely to engage in informational materials and are more likely to change trip plans based on the information obtained. The results of the study clearly support the existence of local visitor centers and underline their importance despite technological advances in travel information distribution.

INTRODUCTION

Visitor information centers (VICs) are an important promotional tool for most destination marketing organizations (DMOs). Several studies have examined users and impacts of VICs (e.g. Dimanche & Taylor, 2006; Pennington-Gray & Vogt, 2003; Tyrrell & Johnston, 2003). According to the English Tourist Board (1997), the purpose of an information center is to give unrivalled tourist information that is accessible to all. However, the ever greater availability of travel information through Web sites and mobile technologies has changed the informational environment for tourists (TIA, 2005).

Connell and Reynolds (1999) stressed that technology in the tourism industry is undoubtedly having an impact on VIC operations. Since VICs are costly venues and DMOs are under increasing pressure to demonstrate the viability of their marketing strategies (Gretzel et al., 2006), it is ever more important to measure the effectiveness of VICs with respect to their influence on various travel-related decisions.

The purpose of the study presented in this paper was to investigate whether VICs are still important in influencing travel behavior. Specifically, differences between highway- and community-based VICs were examined to find out whether costs involved in maintaining local centers are warranted.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Existing VIC research has been concerned with differences in users and non-users of information centers (Andereck & Vogt, 2005; Howard & Gitelson, 1989; Fesenmaier & Vogt, 1993; Muha, 1977) and motivations for stopping (Fesenmaier, 1994; Gitelson &

Perdue, 1987, Fesenmaier & Vogt, 1993). Levels of information use and types of information obtained at VICs have also been investigated (Park & Hwang, 2004; Fesenmaier, Vogt & Stewart, 1993; Gitelson & Perdue, 1987). Differences in users by type of information center have been examined by Pennington-Gray and Vogt (2003) and Dimanche and Taylor (2006). Of major concern is of course the impact of VICs on travel behavior. Several researchers (Fesenmaier & Vogt, 1993; Fesenmaier et al., 1993; Gitelson & Perdue, 1987; Tyrrell & Johnston, 2003; Tierney, 1993; Perdue, 1986; Morton, 2004; Park & Hwang, 2004) have studied VIC impacts, focusing largely on length of stay and expenditures. Since travel decisions are composed of bundles of 'sub-decisions' which vary in decision timing and flexibility (Jeng & Fesenmaier, 2002) it is important to investigate influences on a series of travel-related decisions, such as attractions and restaurants visited after obtaining information at a VIC (Li, Hwang & Fesenmaier, 2002).

In spite of a good deal of VIC-related research, VIC studies have almost exclusively examined highway-based VICs. Fesenmaier (1994) argued that alternative locations and forms of tourist information centers could meet the needs of en-route travelers. In his study, 52% of respondents said they would consider stopping at off-interstate locations if the locations provide good service settings (i.e., nearby gas stations and restaurants) and are easy to access. In fact, Andereck and Vogt (2005)'s study confirmed that local visitor centers are important en-route information sources.

Recently, Pennington-Gray and Vogt (2003) compared users between interstate centers and community-based centers and found differences between users of the two types of centers regarding purpose of trip, timing of stop, travel information obtained, trip length and accommodation choices. Dimanche and Taylor (2006) also provide evidence that the users of interstate welcome centers and local visitor centers are different. However their studies do not answer the question whether local center visitors are also more likely to be influenced.

To close these gaps in VIC research, the study presented in this paper focused on VICs operated at the regional and local level in highway and community-based locations. Also, rather than simply identifying differences in VIC users, effects on several travel-related behaviors were measured.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study is based on a survey of 705 persons who had completed an intercept survey at a toll road travel plaza operated by the regional tourism organization or a community-based center in Northern Indiana and had agreed to participate in a follow-up survey. The mail-based survey was administered in November 2005 following a three step process: 1) An initial survey kit was mailed to each person in the sample; 2) One week later, a postcard was sent; 3) Two weeks later, a second survey kit was mailed to all non-respondents. This process resulted in a 52.5 percent response rate (N=360, 10 letters were undeliverable). 107 respondents did not answer the question whether they had visited centers other than the one where they completed the intercept survey. Only those respondents who did were included in the sample (N=253) so that visitors who had stopped at a community-based center could be clearly identified.

Respondents were slightly more likely to be female (52.3%), affluent (63% have household incomes over \$50,000) and older (66% are over 55 years old, which is

representative of the overall visitors to this region). Descriptive analyses, Chi-Square statistics, and t-tests were used to investigate the role and impact of community-based visitor centers.

FINDINGS

Community-based VIC users are different from toll road VIC visitors regarding a series of trip-related variables (Table 1). Specifically, the results indicate that community-based center visitors are more likely to be first time visitors, travel to visit Northern Indiana, spend more time in Northern Indiana, are more likely to stay at campgrounds and less likely to stay with family, are more likely to visit the region in the form of a weekend getaway, and are less likely to visit family or friends.

No significant differences were found for demographic variables except for residence, with Northern Indiana residents being slightly more likely to stop at local VICs (6.5% toll road compared to 14.7% community-based; $\chi^2 = 5.19$). This finding confirms Pennington-Gray & Vogt’s result that in-state travelers are more likely to visit interior welcome centers than border welcome centers.

Table 1. Differences between Users of Toll Road and Community-based VICs.

Trip Characteristics	Toll road VICs	Community-based VICs	Comparison Statistics
First Trip to NI	9.6%	21.8%	$\chi^2 = 21.37^{***}$
NI as Main Destination	34.8%	56.1%	$\chi^2 = 8.32^{***}$
Type of Accommodation			
Hotel	18.2%	30%	$\chi^2 = 3.17$
Motel	56.1%	41.5%	$\chi^2 = 3.71$
Bed & Breakfast	3.0%	5.4%	$\chi^2 = 0.55$
Camping	6.1%	23.8%	$\chi^2 = 9.44^{***}$
Family	19.7%	9.2%	$\chi^2 = 4.30^{**}$
Friends	6.1%	4.6%	$\chi^2 = .19$
Purpose of Visit			
Vacation	35.8%	46.4%	$\chi^2 = 3.48$
Weekend getaway	15.3%	29.5%	$\chi^2 = 8.51^{***}$
Special event	14%	12%	$\chi^2 = 0.22$
Visit family/friends	54.0%	29.5%	$\chi^2 = 18.67^{***}$
Sporting event	5.8%	1.8%	$\chi^2 = 3.48$
Group tour	2.2%	3.6%	$\chi^2 = .52$
Business	7.3%	7.8%	$\chi^2 = .03$
Meeting/convention	5.1%	4.2%	$\chi^2 = .13$
Average party size	3.4	3.0	t=0.62
Nights spent away from home	7.6	11	t=1.53
Nights spent in NI	1.7	3.6	t=4.0^{***}

NI=Northern Indiana

** p<.05; ***p<.01

Additionally, the current study explored differences in the extent of obtaining and reading travel information at the respective centers. Almost all community-based center visitors obtained information (95.1%) whereas only three quarters (75.4%) of toll road plaza visitors obtained information ($\chi^2 = 24.03$; p=.000). Engagement with the informational material was measured on a 5-point scale ranging from “did not read at all” to “read thoroughly”. A large majority (70.5%) of community-based center visitors

reported that they had read the obtained materials thoroughly or mostly compared to 55.7% for interstate travel center visitors. Overall, community-based visitors engaged more deeply with the information obtained (mean=3.94) than toll road plaza visitors (mean=3.51) ($t=3.46$; $p=.001$).

Respondents who obtained information were further asked to answer questions regarding the impact of the information they obtained at the VIC with respect to specific travel-related decisions (Table 2). Overall, visitors of community-based VICs were significantly more likely to be influenced by the travel information they obtained. A higher percentage of community-based VIC visitors visited an advertised attraction (61.4%), an advertised restaurant (45.5%), an advertised store or shop (54.6%) and attended an advertised event (16.7%). More community-based center visitors also stayed at advertised hotels and planned another trip to Northern Indiana; however, the latter two differences were not significant.

Table 2. Impact on Specific Travel Decisions

Effect of information obtained	Toll Road VICs	Community-based VICs	Comparison Statistics
Visited an advertised attraction	20.0%	61.4%	$\chi^2 = 42.40^{***}$
Visited an advertised restaurant	20.8%	45.5%	$\chi^2 = 16.17^{***}$
Attended an advertised event	4.1%	16.7%	$\chi^2 = 9.15^{**}$
Visited an advertised store or shop	20.8%	54.6%	$\chi^2 = 29.02^{***}$
Stayed in an advertised hotel	16.6%	21.6%	$\chi^2 = 3.59$
Planned another trip to Northern	31.7%	42.8%	$\chi^2 = 4.24$

** $p<.05$; *** $p<.01$

Additional questions were also asked regarding changes to original travel plans as a result of the information obtained. Overall, visitors of community-based VICs were much more likely to alter their trip plans after the VIC stop (Table 3). A large percentage of community-based VIC visitors visited additional attractions and changed originally planned activities. They also were somewhat more likely to increase their length of stay and their expenditures; however these differences were not significant.

Table 3. Travel Behavior Changes

Changes in travel behavior as a result of VIC stop	Toll road VICs	Community-based VICs	Comparison Statistics
Visited additional attractions	20.4%	46.9%	$\chi^2 = 20.05^{***}$
Changes in activities originally planned	11.7%	30.6%	$\chi^2 = 13.02^{***}$
Increased length of stay	14.3%	16.7%	$\chi^2 = 4.84$
Increased amount of money spent	26.7%	35.6%	$\chi^2 = 3.91$

** $p<.05$; *** $p<.01$

APPLICATION OF RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

The results of this study confirm existing research regarding differences in users of highway-based versus local VICs in terms of personal and trip-related characteristics. The results further indicate the potential importance of segmenting the VIC market and providing different resources/materials and services at community-based versus highway based centers.

In addition, the study provided evidence that visitors of community-based centers are more likely to engage in informational materials and are more likely to change trip plans based on the information obtained. This indicates that community-based centers are effective in that they attract visitors who are willing to alter their plans based on the information provided at the VIC. It could also be an indication of community-based centers doing a better job in terms of influencing visitors. This information is especially valuable for local DMOs who have to justify maintaining a VIC in addition to the state welcome centers and regional highway-based VICs.

Most importantly, the results of the study clearly support the existence of local visitor centers and underline their importance despite technological advances in travel information distribution. However, this should not be taken as an indication that the status of VICs will remain the same in the future. VICs should take advantage of emerging technologies to help travelers find their locations and to provide even more engaging informational content and faster as well as more tailored advice to their visitors.

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