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Enhancing Visitors Experiences at Artisan Businesses: A Case Study of the Économusée® Business Model In British Columbia

Item Type	refereed_academic;article
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Download date	2024-12-11 19:59:54
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/49692

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Introduction

ÉCONOMUSÉE© is a non-profit organization founded in 1992 in Quebec, Canada which now includes over 70 Artisans from across Canada and Europe. The model promotes the preservation of traditional knowledge and local entrepreneurship by utilizing cultural tourism to showcase artisans and encourage the consumption of locally produced artisanal products. The model was introduced to the province of British Columbia in 2010 by the (SDÉ) as the catalyst for the initiative ÉCONOMUSÉE® British Columbia Artisans at Work. SDÉ aims to facilitate the economic growth of rural communities in B.C. through the implementation of the ÉCONOMUSÉE® model. This study was completed in order to provide data on the growth and effectiveness of the ÉCONOMUSÉE program in British Columbia since it was first introduced in 2012. This paper will highlight the results of the impact of the model on overall visitor experience.

Literature:

The emergence of the artisan economy has been gaining attention among those involved in economic development, but attention among the research community has been less evident. In 2012, a SSHRC Knowledge Synthesis project to collate knowledge on the Traditional Craft Trades (TCT's) in Canada highlighted that significant knowledge gaps that must be addressed in order to fully realize its' potential (Vaugeois, et al 2013). In particular, the report highlighted the need to a) develop a clear definition of the sector and b) to determine the value of the sector to the economy. Some follow up work has taken place in BC on a sample of food artisans (Vaugeois & Predyk, 2016) which found evidence that consumer demand for artisanal products has been increasing whereby 80% of artisans indicated that demand for their products over the past 3 years had increased. This demand was generated from both resident markets (70%) and visitor markets (30%). The artisan economy is clearly dependent upon the visitor economy and the model is designed to ensure positive customer experiences on site. What would be valuable to understand is how visitors to ÉCONOMUSÉE sites evaluate their overall experience. This information, if positive, would validate the model and provide valuable insights to other artisan businesses that are targeting visiting markets.

Research studies highlight that providing consistent, high quality visitor experiences is a complex challenge (Chronis, 2012; McKay, 2007; Reussner 2003). Visitors are becoming more interested in authenticity where they evaluate the quality of their experience by how "real" they perceive it to be (Davallon et al 2000; Lopez-Sintas et al 2012). This sense of reality is heightened when visitors are able to learn about and interact with the environment they are visiting (Grenier 2010; Macdonald 2007; McKay, 2007). In order to provide learning experiences, many artisans are adopting practices from the museum world to provide visitors with a sense of knowledge about the places they are interacting with (Bannon et al, 2005). The addition of this learning component by businesses is believed to impact financial performance as well (Hume, 2011). By observing the creation or manufacturing of a product provides evidence to the visitor that the products are "real" which creates more perceived value and

also incents the visitor to take away a part of the onsite experience by purchasing products from the business (Geissler et al, 2006). As well, the perceived high quality of the products helps to create a customer base that has strong loyalty to products and businesses and as such, incents repeat visitation for additional purchases. When the experience and products are shared with others, a strong word of mouth or local marketing presence is established for the business (Bonn et al, 2007). Beyond the economic benefits that these trends have on artisans, others are also recognizing the important role that these businesses are playing to educate society on important issues of heritage and of the equally important role in heritage preservation (Bryan et al, 2012; Corsane et al, 2007).

The ÉCONOMUSÉE model attempts to design a visitor experience that fuses education and consumption of products from artisans. The model incorporates six elements including: a) a welcoming area where visitors are greeting and find out what an ÉCONOMUSÉE is, b) a workshop where visitors can see artisans working on their craft, c) an area for the interpretation of traditional knowledge, d) an area for the interpretation of contemporary know how, e) an area for documentation and archives and f) a boutique where people can purchase the products.

Methodology:

The two guiding questions for the study were: 1) What is the economic impact or change in the economic performance at each of the sites using the ÉCONOMUSÉE model? And 2) How do visitors to each of the sites evaluate their overall experience? This paper summarizes the results of the second question. Multiple methods were used to measure the impacts of the model on visitor experience including visitor count data from operators, an online survey of visitors, and observation of site usage by visitors. The online survey was completed using a convenience sampling method whereby every ÉCONOMUSÉE site had a ballot box that visitors could enter their name and email into for a chance to win a donated item or basket of goods from the business. By entering into the draw, visitors were allowing the researchers to contact them by email to participate in the short survey. This method has been shown to produce high response rates since 2012 in a variety of Canadian contexts (Vaugeois, Parker, Evernden, Sliskovic, 2015). A total of 1,061 invitations to participate in the survey were sent out to visitors to the businesses and 435 visitors responded by completing the survey (41% response rate) Further observations were conducted at each site when the researchers were present to watch for people's movements and interactions through the sites.

Key findings

All of the ÉCONOMUSÉE sites in the study saw an increase in visitation after the introduction of the model. The sample of visitors to the sites were primarily local visitors with 39% originating from Vancouver Island and 34% from the rest of British Columbia. Approximately 52% of visitors were from outside the region of the artisan business and stayed at least one night. Another 32% were local residents, and the remaining 16% were from outside the region but close enough that they did not need to stay overnight. Visitors were most commonly travelling with their spouse/partner (43%) their family (36%) or friend (25%).

Visitors were motivated to purchase products (46%), support local producers (43%), explore the area (40%), and go on an outing with family (42%). The motivations varied between sites whereby

visitors to larger, more established sites with consumable products and food and beverage services rated that their motivation was to purchase products and support local producers. The majority of visitors (58%) were visiting the artisan for the first time and the remaining 42% had visited before. The average number of repeat visits for these visitors was approximately 5.

Overall visitor experience was extremely positive. About 93% of visitors rated their experience as excellent (51%), very good, (31%) or good (11%) and 96% of visitors would recommend visiting the artisan to others. The highest ratings on the ÉCONOMUSÉE elements at the artisan businesses were for the retail boutiques (93%) and for the welcoming areas of the sites (93%). There was some variation in the ratings of the design elements between the sites however the sample size difference between the sites prevented further comparisons.

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, this study demonstrated the value of adopting the ÉCONOMUSÉE model to Artisan businesses. At this point in time, it appears that there are several positive indicators of success for the model. Of the three sites able to provide data on visitor levels, all three saw an increase in visitation post- ÉCONOMUSÉE. Visitor experience was extremely positive and there was high repeat visitation levels at sites. A little over half of visitors were from outside the region and stayed overnight with most staying several nights generating additional economic opportunity for accommodation providers in the region. Although it is unclear to what extent visitors view the education or interpretive elements as core to their experience, as the ÉCONOMUSÉE model becomes more familiar in the region - the recognition and value of the interpretive aspects of the business may increase. The evidence produced in this study provides justification for further investment in models that are purposefully designed to provide visitors with experiences that integrate education and retail experiences.

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