Innovative Leisure Practices

CASES AS CONDUITS BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE
Innovative Leisure Practices:
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Editorial team:
Nicole Vaugeois, Ph.D., Vancouver Island University
Pete Parker, Ph.D., Vancouver Island University
Aggie Weighill, Ph.D., Vancouver Island University

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Chapter 8
Supporting informed destination development using visitor intelligence

Nicole L. Vaugeois, Vancouver Island University, Nanaimo, BC, Canada
Pete Parker, Vancouver Island University, Nanaimo, BC, Canada

Chapter Summary

Having an understanding of the profile of visiting markets can assist destinations to make informed and effective marketing investments. This case study describes a collaborative model to design and pilot a community-based visitor experience study on Vancouver Island intended to create a system for ongoing, local data for tourism development. Initiated in 2013 by two communities and Vancouver Island University, the model expanded across the island to 9 communities by 2015 due to its success and community buy in. The model intercepts visitors on their trip asking them to complete a ballot with their email address in exchange for a chance to win a set of attractive prizes from the destination. In exchange, visitors are later sent a web based survey by email asking about their experience, preferences, satisfaction and characteristics. The project has enabled participating communities to learn more about their visitors and to enhance their marketing intelligence. The project is evaluated with communities annually at a meeting where refinements are made for successive years. This project highlights that systems to provide locally relevant data on visitors are valuable to assist communities to allocate their scarce marketing dollars effectively. The case study describes the elements in the design of the model, the process used to gather data, the tools used to share results and the feedback from the community stakeholders involved. Insights gained are valuable to those interested in modernizing data collection on visitors at the community or regional level.

Learning Objectives:

1. To articulate the importance of visitor intelligence data in tourism business and destination development.
2. To identify challenges and gaps that exist in current visitor intelligence research;
3. To describe a multi partner initiative that has provided locally relevant, ongoing visitor data to small and mid-sized communities in the Vancouver Island region since 2013.
The Issue, Opportunity or Trend

Communities that are serious about tourism need to obtain and use market research to understand who their current visitors are and how satisfied they are with their experience. Having access to local visitor data provides numerous benefits to the range of tourism stakeholders in a destination. Armed with research data, destination marketing organizations (DMO’s) are able to maximize the return on investment of their often limited and unstable marketing funds by participating in programs that align with their desired target markets. Tourism businesses can use the evidence of consumer demand to make strategic decisions enabling the growth of their business, or to assist obtaining financial support from funding institutions. Municipal bodies are able to identify the types of activities that visitors engage in and their relative satisfaction with community infrastructure and amenities. And collectively, all stakeholders can utilize marketing intelligence to design tourism development plans including strategic initiatives to satisfy current visitors or tap into new markets.

While these benefits may seem obvious to some, the reality is that very few communities have developed a system to obtain information from their visitors on an ongoing basis. This is particularly true of many rural areas at early stages of tourism development. Unfortunately, these destinations often have limited budgets for marketing and a lack of intellectual capital to undertake much needed market research. In the absence of local market data, they often rely on macro level data sources on visitors in urban areas, or from provincial and national sources. This data is unlikely to represent the profile of their own visitors and if used to guide decisions, could result in risky and ineffective investments for the communities.

There is a need for tourism researchers to design models to gather visitor data at the community level on an ongoing basis that results in enhanced marketing intelligence for stakeholders. The purpose of this case study is to describe the design and implementation of an innovative and successful model developed by multiple tourism stakeholders on Vancouver Island, Canada. After highlighting some insights from the literature, the context of the case study will be described and then details on the design and implementation of the model will be detailed including the outcomes that have emerged.

Literature

The literature on visitor experience has expanded rapidly in recent years (Sharpley & Stone, 2010) largely in response to the growing interest in understanding the multi-dimensional nature of experience. Tourism researchers have made tremendous contributions to understand the nature of the visitor experience including tourist satisfaction (Alegre & Garau, 2010; Rucks & Geissler, 2011; Zabkar et al, 2010), segmentation, psychographics and niche markets (Andriotis & Agiomirgianakis, 2008; Arimond et al, 2003; Canadian Tourism Commission, 2015) and spatial analysis (Edwards & Griffin, 2013). Additionally, the focus on methodological advancements in this research has also expanded the ability of researchers to analyse and interpret visitor data (Stradling et al, 2007; Priporas & Vassiliadis, 2013).

Many of the studies used to produce this knowledge are conducted as single investigations on visitors with the intent of enhancing academic knowledge about visitor experience. While useful and necessary, there remains a need to ensure that those involved in destination marketing can access visitor research to improve their investment decisions (Liburd, 2011)). In particular, destinations require enhanced knowledge about the origin of their visitors, their satisfaction levels, travel activities, spending and trip planning behaviors to enable them to make more informed investments in tourism marketing. Despite the numerous opportunities that exist for academics and destination marketing organizations to work together to combine their resources and skill sets to gather, share and utilize visitor research, there are limited examples of collaboration in the literature. This case study contributes to this gap and may inspire further knowledge exchange in destination marketing as called for by Hudson (2013).
The Innovation

Case Context

Vancouver Island, British Columbia relies heavily on tourism as a core contributor to the economy. The region provides visitors with adventure, culinary and agritourism experiences in both terrestrial and marine settings. Despite the fact that the last provincial visitor research was undertaken in British Columbia in 1995, the Vancouver Island region has been proactive in researching and profiling its visitors. In 2003, a region wide visitor research model provided tourism stakeholders with comprehensive data on visitors in all four seasons. Then, in 2008, a region wide study provided updated information on visitors led by the regional DMO Tourism Vancouver Island. While useful, these efforts relied on significant funding from external sources and as such, have been difficult to maintain on an ongoing basis. Additionally, these regional studies were not focused on providing individual communities with results on their visitors per se. Many of the communities in the region are small and at early stages of tourism development and support for continuous investment in tourism by local government varies widely. As such the budgets to invest in tourism marketing or market research are often limited and highly unstable, and the capacity to undertake market research among staff members (if they exist) is usually quite weak. While the regional economy highlights opportunities for growth of small business, tourism businesses often have difficulty obtaining financing due to their inability to provide evidence of visitor demand in their business plans. While significant investments in tourism have been made, they have largely been based on outdated visitor data, one-off studies by consultants, and guesswork.

In an effort to address these systemic issues and enhance the availability of marketing intelligence, researchers piloted a visitor experience study (VES) with the City of Nanaimo and the community of Tofino in 2013. After a successful pilot, the model was refined and expanded in 2014 to include the community of Ucluelet and the Cowichan Valley, and in 2015 to include nine communities in the Vancouver Island region (see figure 1). The innovative model was developed using a collaborative approach with multiple stakeholders who shared an interest in understanding community and regional visitor experience.

Figure 1: Map of the study region: Vancouver Island, BC
Stakeholders Involved

The success of this innovation is due in large part to the collaboration of multiple stakeholders who share an interest in community and regional tourism development. The original model was designed as part of a Cooperative Work placement by a fourth year student Nichola Evernden at Vancouver Island University who worked with her supervisor Dr. Nicole Vaugeois and the Destination Marketing Organizations (DMO) of Tourism Nanaimo and Tourism Tofino. After the success of this pilot in 2013, the partnership sought the skills of a private consultancy called the Sociable Scientists to help expand the model with additional communities. In 2014, the model was expanded to include the community of Ucluelet and the Cowichan Valley, and following that in 2015, additional communities included Port Alberni, Parksville, Qualicum Beach, Courtenay, Campbell River, and the communities within the sub-region of North Vancouver Island.

Each of the partners in this initiative have a clear role in the VES (see figure 2). The Community DMO initiates the study within their community when they are seeking market research. They are also responsible for encouraging buy in from local businesses, selecting ballot locations, providing input on the survey and determining and obtaining incentive prizes. The Sociable Scientists signs a contract with each community and coordinates the data collection process. The University is responsible for the data analysis and preparation of the visitor profiles and assists in presentations back to the communities.

Approach Used and the Impact

The model was developed in a collaborative manner utilizing the resources and capacities of researchers at a local University, a private research consultancy, DMO’s and tourism businesses. The model’s innovative design incorporates the participation of businesses, the use of pre-consent ballots, incentive prizes and a post-experience on-line visitor survey. The model has evolved over time due to continuous evaluation by the stakeholders. Its evolution is described in three stages.

Stage 1: Initial pilot

The initial pilot of the model was done in 2013 with Vancouver Island University and Tourism Tofino and Tourism Nanaimo. In this first stage, the partners met via teleconference calls to discuss the need for the data, to clarify roles for the pilot and to determine timelines for the data collection and reporting. Both communities were in need of better data but had limited funds or staff time to contribute to the project. They decided to pool a modest investment towards a salary for a Cooperative
Education student to pilot the project in both communities. Nichola Evernden, a 4th year student in the Bachelor of Tourism Management at VIU did her Cooperative Education work term on contract with Tourism Tofino. The original survey was designed based on the instrument used in the 2003 Vancouver Island study so that comparable data would emerge. As the 2003 was done using in field intercepts, the instrument was redesigned to take place as a web-based survey using SurveyMonkey as the platform. The survey instrument was modified with input from the DMO’s to ensure that it represented for example, attractions and community specific amenities. The resulting survey gathered data on visitor motivations, travel planning behavior and informational sources, overall experience, satisfaction, group composition, spending and suggested enhancements.

The sample of visitors was obtained via convenience sampling methods and the use of ballot boxes at 10-12 locations within each community. The DMO partners selected a range of businesses and attractions within their community where visitors were likely to frequent while on vacation. These included for example, coffee shops, retail outlets, tour operators, visitor information centers, accommodations, special events, marinas, and parks. Each business was approached to request their
participation in the study by hosting a ballot box for a 12 week data collection period. These were often placed at the guest reception area or an area where visitors might be waiting. These ballot boxes were customized with visuals and branding by the DMO and via email (see Figure 3 and 4). In exchange, visitors were able to enter their name in to win a series of prizes determined by the destination which included both experiences and tangible products. These ballots were gathered bi-weekly by the destination and sent to the researchers who then sent a request to participate in the study to the emails provided.

Data were later analysed in SPSS by the University partner and results were shared in an 8-10 page user friendly visitor profile for the community (see figure 5). Results were also shared publicly in a stakeholder event.

Stage 2: Expanding the model to include sub-regions

Early in 2014, the partnership expanded to include a private research consultancy called The Sociable Scientists. This was done to allow the model to expand across the region as the private firm could take over the contract process with communities and hire Nichola Evernden (now graduated with her degree). This expansion of the model to a business focus proved to be critical for the success of the model as it allowed for a strong client centered focus to emerge whereby future contracts for the firm were dependent upon the provision of successful research in each community. Now, communities signed a business contract with the Sociable Scientists where for a modest investment of approximately $5000-$6000, the community then received the VES for one data collection period.

Based on the success of the first year and with the inclusion of a new partner, the decision was made to invite the first communities to share their experience with the VES team at a meeting where other DMO’s within the region were invited. This meeting allowed for these communities to learn more about the model, why visitor data is critical and to hear from their colleagues on how it worked for them and how they have been using the new data. After this gathering, two new DMO’s signed on for 2014 data collection including Ucluelet and a sub-region called the Cowichan Valley. This shift allowed the partners to see if the model would work in a small region as opposed to a single community. In this case, additional ballot locations were added to ensure that locations throughout the sub-region were incorporated.
Stage 3: Expansion across the island

The second expansion of the model occurred in 2015 where after another evaluation gathering, additional communities decided to participate in the 2015 process. This resulted in the VES model to incorporate the majority of communities and sub-regions of Vancouver Island. In this stage, a sub-region in the North was able to gain buy in from a number of the communities and obtain external funding support through the Island Coast Economic Trust. Similarly, the Parksville Qualicum Beach sub-region was able to gather support from community partners to contribute to the VES. This buy in would not have been possible without the success of the first two stages and the validation of the value of the model by the previous DMO’s.

Key findings

The VES model has produced numerous insights about visitors coming to the communities and sub-regions of Vancouver Island, as well as numerous insights about how to engage community based research. The model has gathered data from visitors in each of the locations with sample sizes ranging from 225 to 1544 completed surveys and response rates of 37-58% (average response rate is 48%) as shown in table 1. Since the original pilot, participating communities have continued their involvement in subsequent years indicating their satisfaction with the model. With experience and continuous evaluation, the sample sizes have increased over time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community and Data Collection Period</th>
<th>Completed surveys</th>
<th>Response rate from ballots received</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanaimo</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tofino</td>
<td>475</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanaimo</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tofino</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ucluelet</td>
<td>661</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cowichan</td>
<td>582</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanaimo</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tofino</td>
<td>733</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cowichan</td>
<td>609</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parksville Qualicum Beach</td>
<td>1544</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vancouver Island North</td>
<td>522</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campbell River</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comox Valley</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port Alberni</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The visitor profiles that have emerged through the VES indicate that communities are wise to understand their own, vs. regional visitors. Variables that often differ among the destinations include length of stay, visitor spending, inspiration to visit, trip planning behavior and suggested enhancements. Variables that are fairly consistent among the profiles include visitor origin, group size and composition and modes of travel used. For example, visitors in the 2015 visitor profile to the Parksville Qualicum Beach area were more inspired by beaches, sandcastles and family experiences, had 27% plan their trip 1-6 months
in advance, and spent on average $649 a day per group. Visitors to the North Island were more inspired by nature, wilderness, whales and beauty, had 43% plan their trip 1-6 months in advance and spent an average of $611 per day per group. The City of Nanaimo visitors were more inspired by friends, family and shopping, had 39% plan 1-6 months ahead and had an average spending of $489 per day. These few comparisons illustrate some of the insights that have been gained at the community level and justify the value of engaging community based research to understand visitors.

For many of the communities, the VES has provided the DMO’s with the first community specific data sets on visitors to enable them to understand their current visitors. The insights produced on visitors have aided tourism stakeholders to make more strategic marketing and development decisions at the business, community and regional level. Feedback from the DMO’s has expressed strong support for the model based on comparing the value of the information with the financial investment required and the ease of application for their staff. The initial communities continued the use of the model to gather data on visitors in a different season, and they actively recruited additional communities to adopt the model in the second and subsequent seasons.

The survey instrument used in the VES is similar in each community, but with some customization options. The response categories for the attractions and activities that visitors participate in for example, are customized for each community. The instrument has been adapted in a number of communities to gather data on subsets of visitors, for example, those attending a special event. In these cases, survey logic is used to identify visitors attending a specific event and then those visitors are asked a few additional questions enabling the community to understand specific event visitors. Similarly, some of the communities are interested in the Canadian Tourism Commission Explorer Quotient, a market segmentation tool that uses psychographic profiles to understand visitor motivations and trip behavior (see http://en.destinationcanada.com/resources-industry/explorer-quotient ). For these communities, similar to the special event process, the end of the survey asked respondents if they were willing to answer a few more questions and if they did, they were routed out of the survey monkey site temporarily to take the EQ survey to find out what type of explorer they were. They were then routed back into the VES survey to provide their EQ type before completing the survey. This allowed the communities investing in the EQ model to verify their visitor types and respond to their needs accordingly. In 2015, the model also incorporated a question to provide a Net Promoter score as this indicator has become more valued by Destination BC as a metric of positive visitor experience. The model continues to grow in application to additional communities with the intention of moving to other regions of the province. Interest from the Northwest Territories, Ontario and Ireland has also emerged providing opportunities to test the model in different contexts. Additionally, the model is being considered for sector specific implementation (e.g. marine tourism, golf).

In summary, the evolution and success of the VES model has been possible due to a number of success factors including:

1. The engagement of multiple partners with clear roles;
2. Community buy in, engagement and ownership of the results;
3. The affordability and value of the investment for DMO’s;
4. The format and speed of the reporting of the results;
5. The ongoing nature of the model with opportunities to buy in whenever a community wants;
6. Insights gained and opportunities to learn from other communities;
7. Professionalism and client centered approach by the Sociable Scientists;
8. Continual evaluation and enhancements of the model;
9. Credibility of data due to involvement by the University.
Implications and Lessons learned

This case study will close by sharing some of the implications and lessons learned in the initiative in hopes that others can incorporate them in future research design.

Perhaps the most important implication to share is that communities can obtain data on their visitors through the use of such models. The immediate impacts of this innovation has been in the communities where the VES has been applied. These communities, and the tourism stakeholders within, have benefitted from learning more about who their visitors are, why and how they travelled to the destination, their satisfaction, spending levels and suggested improvements. These insights have aided them in aligning marketing and product development decisions with the needs of visiting markets. For example, the data has been cited in the Tourism Master Plan in Tofino and in marketing plans of the DMO’s. The data provides a valid proxy for use in future funding applications for communities. For example, communities could use the suggested enhancements provided by visitors as priority infrastructure projects and the evidence from the VES may assist them in supporting their case.

The application of this model in the Vancouver Island context highlights a number of opportunities to enhance visitor research methods in contexts outside of BC. The model is potentially scalable to understand sector groups, events, regions, and tourism routes. The design of the model also highlights the need to modernize research methodology in visitor research to provide communities and regions with accessible, affordable and localized data sets. Similarly, it illustrates the need to enhance research capacity and knowledge sharing between tourism researchers and destination marketing organizations. Where communities can obtain the participation of a local University or College that can aid in the design, data collection and analysis, there are likely many more opportunities to arrive at a similar win-win scenario. The need for this type of collaboration aligns with calls to get more academic researchers and destination marketing bodies collaborating on studying visitor research (Fyall et al, 2012). The emphasis on co-creating the study with community based partners and the format used in knowledge mobilization also addresses criticisms in the literature (Hudson, 2013).

The future application of the VES in the Vancouver Island region looks promising. The partners will continue to evaluate its evolution and plan to scale the model to be applied in sectors and regions off the island. The community data sets are accessible for students at VIU to use in classroom and thesis projects which may provide value added insights as the data is mined around their study questions. In 2016, the University plans to combine the community data from 2015 into a macro data set to mine for additional questions on visitors to the entire island. For example, this data set could provide insights on the visiting friends and relatives market, nature based visitors or any number of other niche markets.

Monitoring the evolution of the VES has enabled the partners to learn a number of important lessons that are valuable to share with others that may consider adapting it in their own context. In closing this case, the lessons learned in the VES from 2013-2015 include:

1. Engage multiple tourism stakeholders and utilize their respective strengths and resources;
2. Identify clear roles for each stakeholder in the model;
3. Gain business and venue buy in and train them in their role;
4. Consider engaging a University for added credibility;
5. Place ballot boxes where visitors are likely to see them during their stay and move them if they are not working;
6. Gather data from visitors post-experience to achieve more valid results on the entire experience (as opposed to intercepts at early stages or mid-way through a visit);
7. Use attractive incentive prizes to garner attention and participation from visitors;
8. Track and create stories from the participants who win the incentive prizes;
9. Create user friendly reports and share widely;
10. Engage in regular check in and evaluation of the model by the various stakeholders.
Discussion Questions

1. What types of data are important for businesses to have about their visitors to enable them to make effective marketing decisions? What about for community Destination Marketing Organizations?
2. What are the potential risks of making marketing or development decisions without adequate intelligence on visitors?
3. How does your local Destination Marketing Organization collect data on its visitors? Is a University partner involved in this data collection?
4. What visitor intelligence data can you find when you do an online search for your community? How could this benefit or limit tourism development in the destination?

References

Supporting informed destination development using visitor intelligence

Vaugeois and Parker


Authors:

Nicole Vaugeois is the BC Regional Innovation Chair in Tourism and Sustainable Rural Development at Vancouver Island University. In this role, she provides research support to rural areas in transition from resource based to experience based economies. She works closely with industry, local, regional and provincial government bodies to align her research to the challenges and issues they face. Email: Nicole.vaugeois@viu.ca

Dr. Pete Parker teaches in the Sustainable Leisure Management program at VIU. His research focuses on creating and sustaining healthy communities and healthy environments. More specifically, he evaluates how individuals and communities can diversify and sustain their livelihoods, particularly through sustainable nature-based tourism. Email: Pete.parker@viu.ca