

The Changing Traveler: Information Needs and the Relevance of Visitor Information Centers (VICs)

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Background

- Technology has caused significant shifts in travel planning behavior (Wang, Park, & Fesenmaier, 2011)
 - Mobile and Web 2.0 (Buhalis & Law, 2008)
 - Importance of online travel reviews (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Yoo, Lee, Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2009)



Last-minute & on-the-go planning

- Need for information AT the destination (DiPietro, Wang, Rompf, & Severt, 2007; Paul, B., & Peter, 2005; Rompf & Ricci, 2005)
- VICs are local experts (D'ambra & Mistilis, 2010)

Where does this leave the VIC?

- Need for trustworthy, personalized advice
- Need for information at the destination
- BUT: similar information easily accessible & available online



How are changes in tourist information search affecting VICs and how can VICs remain relevant in today's technology heavy world?

Methodology

- Qualitative research
- 18 One-on-one interviews with tourists aged 25-70
- 3 focus groups with 21 people total aged 15-32
- Analysed for recurring themes
- Interpretive approach

Results-Personnel is key

- Need in depth, personal knowledge to make recommendations for novel activities
- Personal and catered to interests
- Varied in age and interests



“Someone that knows the area, that’s what I like...They can cut through this wall of pamphlets, which many times look the same, and give me what I need, try this or try that. A personal recommendation by a local goes a long way.”

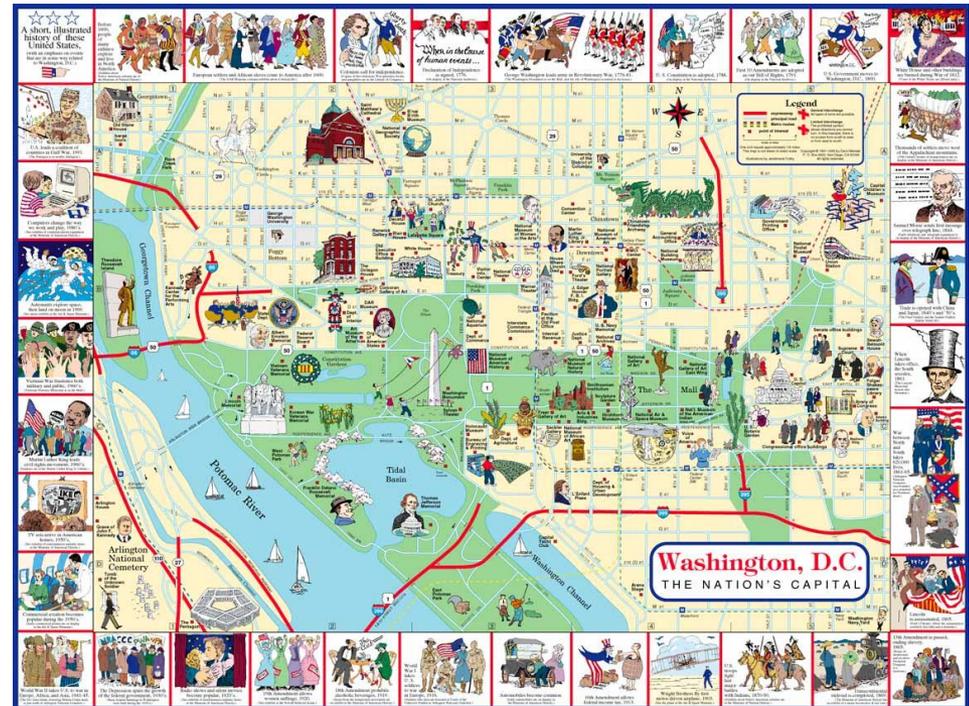
Results-Don't want to feel “marketed” to

- Don't market to them or give standard answers
- Still liked brochures but only after personalized attention

“As soon as you speak to the locals, they take you to all these places that the tourists don't go and that is the type of holiday I like and that is not the type of things that come up in brochure. 'Cause I hate that, the marketing, it is all being branded in a certain way and you are always let down because it is never as nice as the photos and it stinks and smells of smoke and there are stains on the mattress and it is meant to be 5 star, so you feel ripped off. So, definitely the locals.”

Maps

- Despite mobile phones with Internet access and navigation systems, tourists still like printed maps.



“they’ve got...a map you can pull out [and] it has things all over the place and you can look it up from there... That is why I like those maps.”

Novelty/Unique Experiences

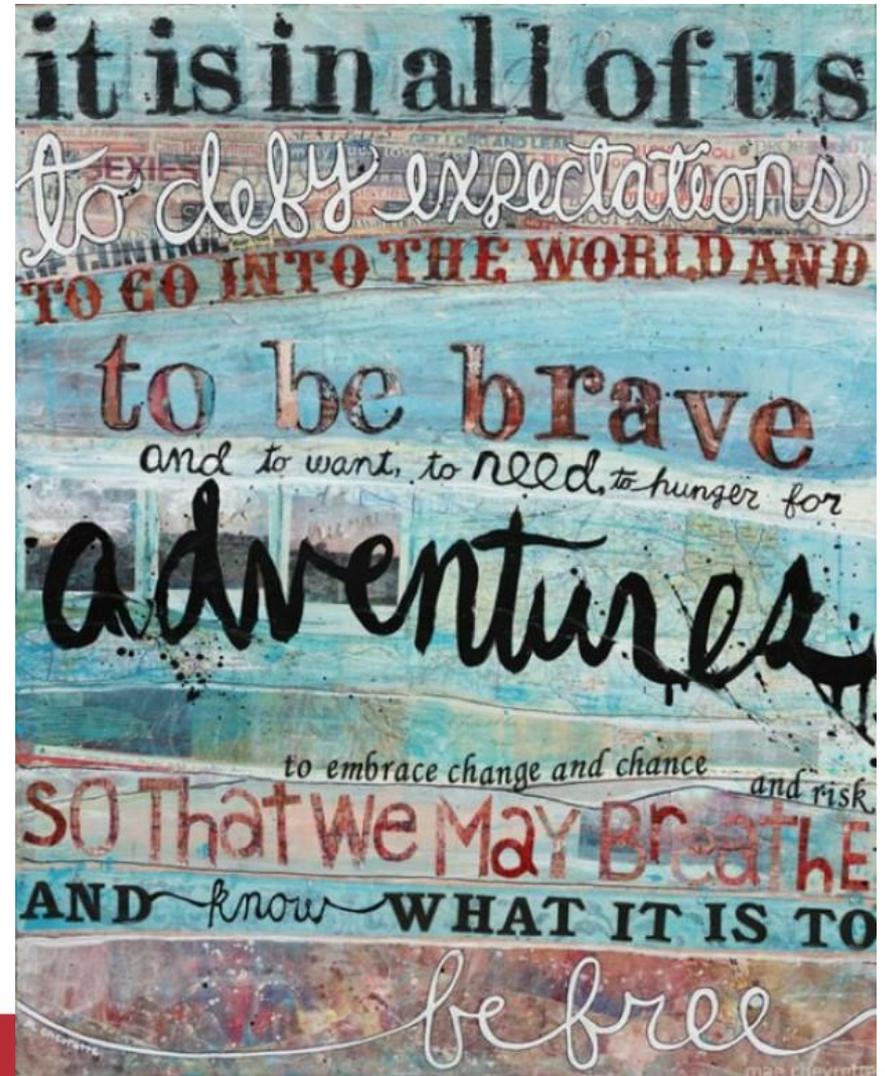
“because if it is on the website, it is usually something quite generic that a lot of people are searching...it is usually something generic and mediocre whereas if you go to a place and you stop by asking the person at the hotel you are staying at [if] there a good music scene in the city and then you head that way and then you can ask a local or someone that looks like they would go to that type of thing.”



Little to no planning

- Daily lives are heavily scheduled
- Want spontaneity

“You know, I spend too much time on technology at home. I’m glued to it. Maybe I’m looking for something different...we are just playing by ear. We knew there was quite a lot to do in the area...so we are just exploring and seeing the area.”





OUTDATED

Outdated

- Information provided by VIC personnel is often same as online or in a brochure rack
- VIC visits only if bored/stumble upon for young visitors but still often the first stop at the destination for older travelers

Go “straight to the Google God...it just covers so much in such a short amount of time.”





Conclusions

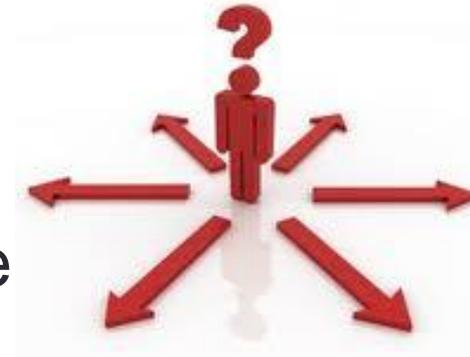
- Tourists' on-the-go planning and need for trustworthy travel advice seems to fall perfectly in line with the function of VICs, however, VICs seem to be struggling with this changing environment.
- VIC must adapt methods of getting info to the changing traveler
- Recommendations from locals, catering to interests

Conclusions

- No marketing spiel
- Brochures and maps are still relevant but they want a personalized conversation first
- Personalized information in line with their interest

Implications

- VICs need to provide workers with opportunities to experience local attractions (popular and off the beaten track) through fam trips
- VICs need varied personnel with diverse interests and ages
- Brochures and maps are still important, especially those who are planning on the go
- Technology has not replaced traditional information sources, it just adds to the variety of sources but has changed expectations regarding information



Questions?

Thank you



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