

TRAVEL AGENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this study was to understand the travel agents' attitudes toward CSR of travel agencies. Specifically, the study examined the relationship between travel agents' demographic factors and job related factors and their attitudes toward CSR. The findings from this study revealed travel agents hold mostly positive attitudes toward CSR. This study found that only gender and duration of work experience had significant influence on travel agents' attitudes toward corporate social responsibility.

Key Words: Travel Agents, Corporate Social Responsibility

INTRODUCTION

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is defined as "actions that appear to further some social good, beyond the interests of the firm as well as those which are required by law" (McWilliams and Siegel, 2001, p. 117). Scholars have suggested that industrial corporations engage in socially responsible activities because they recognize benefits that come from the activities; an increase in positive image, the likelihood of hiring top quality employees, and a positive effect on the company's bottom line (McWilliams and Siegel, 2001, Banerjee, 2006). Traditionally, CSR has been recognized usually with regard to large corporations, so it is not surprising that CSR research tends to be conducted largely on large corporations. Contemporary society, however, pressures even small companies to engage in CSR performances. In this regard, some recent literature has emphasized the importance of CSR performance in small-and medium-sized enterprises, which may be very different from that in larger organizations (Fuller 2003).

The tourism industry nowadays is dominated by small-and medium-sized enterprises (SME). Most recently, there has been an increasing interest in the role of SME regarding social issues. According to Agenda 21 for European Tourism (2002), SMEs can contribute to sustainable tourism development through demonstrating CSR performances. Although some literature has recently drawn their attention to issues regarding small-and medium-sized tourism enterprises (SMTE) and CSR, there are very few empirical studies that examine the tourism practitioners' attitudes toward CSR of SMTE in practical business environments. Therefore, this study aims primarily to understand the travel agents' attitudes toward CSR of travel agencies, the small and medium sized business within tourism. In addition, the study examined the relationship between travel agents' demographic factors and job related factors and their attitudes toward CSR.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CSR and Small Business

Compared to large corporations, corporate social responsibility in small businesses has been studied infrequently. According to Thomson and Smith (1991), there are several reasons for this limited examination. First, the public and the managers of SMEs believe there are not sufficient resources to perform CSR in SMEs. Second, research methodologies developed for large-sized corporations may not be applicable to small businesses. Third, information on CSR performance by SMEs is relatively difficult to obtain. Lastly, the greater visibility of large-sized corporations usually results in more research interest because of the scope of larger organizations.

Recent literature has revealed that the majority of SMEs believe that organizations like themselves need to pay more attention to their social responsibility (Southwell 2004). In the tourism literature, some studies have identified small businesses relevant to sustainable tourism and environmental and social responsibility (Horobin, Helen, Long, and Jonathan 1996). In Australia, Carlsen, Getz, and Ali-Knight (2001) examined the responsible behaviors of small, family-owned businesses in terms of environmental practices and educating tourists on conservation matters. This study found that members and owners of small, family-owned businesses are more likely to express positive attitudes toward implementing sustainable tourism behaviors. Specifically, tour operators showed better practices regarding educating tourists on conservation matters than the other types of businesses, such as hotels, motels, and tourist attractions.

Although, there are few studies regarding what factors affect the behaviors of small businesses regarding sustainable development, some scholars agreed that the attitudes of owners and managers are most critical in determining behaviors (Dewhurst and Thomas 2003). Horobin, Helen, Long, and Jonathan (1996) examined attitudes and behaviors of owners and managers of small business in the U.K. regarding sustainable tourism, and found that small business owners perceived the importance of sustainable tourism development, although they felt there was a lack of information on how to implement it.

Some studies have examined whether personal characteristics affect managers' and owners' attitudes toward sustainable development and responsibility. Horobin, Helen, Long, and Jonathan (1996) reported males who were more motivated to make a profit were less supportive of sustainable tourism development than females. Conversely, Carlsen, Getz, and Ali-Knight (2001) found that age and gender did not affect attitudes or business behaviors. Also, they found there is an association between the level of education of respondents in small businesses and business behaviors in educating tourists about cultures of the host community.

While some scholars have examined the relationship between personal attitudes, business behaviors, and sustainability and social responsibility, previous studies have suggested this relationship needs to be tested more rigorously (e.g., Carlsen, Getz, and Ali-Knight 2001; Dewhurst and Thomas 2003), as this research suggests findings are inconsistent about personal characteristics determining attitudes toward responsibility and sustainable development. Thus more research is needed to understand the decision-making process that leads small business owners' to have a sense of social responsibility.

Travel Agencies

Travel agencies play a critical role in the tourism industry, making important links between tourists and destinations. Traditionally, the role of travel agencies was recognized as selling airline tickets, and hotel bookings, however recently their role has been transferred as main travel service supplier or travel expert and counselor (Bitner and Booms 1982). Recently due to the internet, tourists have been able to plan and package their own travel itineraries through accessing information online. As a result, travel agents have had to rethink their traditional roles.

Given a sense of credibility that the information on the internet has provided, tourists have felt less need to work directly with travel agents. Thus, travel agents have found a way to provide value added information as well as superior customer service as a way to maintain a customer base and entice new customers (Lawton and Page 1997). Moreover, travel agents have determined that they are in a position where they can influence destination choice as well as itinerary choice based on personal experience (i.e., FAM trips) and customer feedback (i.e., testimonials). Lovelock (2008) has argued that "more than any other stakeholder, agents are in a critical position to influence the tourists' destination choice" (p. 340). Furthermore, travel agents have determined that they can play a role for

tourists that the internet based companies cannot when the tourist is in situ, particularly in the event of a crisis, in that they can be a familiar voice on the end of the phone when needed.

Travel agents have contributed to the development of many destinations. According to Lovelock (2008), the success of a destination depends on the positive support of travel agents. Travel agents may sell a destination or refuse to book or provide recommendations for specific destinations. With the recognition of the important role of travel agent in decision-making of destination choice and destination development (Lawton and Page 1997), some studies argued the need for research to understand the role and influence that the travel agents have towards sustainable tourism development (Lovelock 2008).

First, Carey, Gountas, and Gilbert (1997) argued that research about sustainable tourism needs to emphasize the role of the supplier. They concluded that marketing strategies of tour operators and travel agents may influence sustainable tourism. Thus, they suggested that travel companies need to develop a long term development plan instead of a short term strategy focusing on the economic benefits.

On the other hand, Lovelock (2008) examined attitudes and behaviors of travel agents toward ethical issues, such as sending tourists to human-rights-challenged destinations and found that most respondents did not recognize the negative impact of their behaviors upon the host destination. Further, her study found that travel agents feel a greater responsibility to their customers and employers than to the host community. According to Lovelock (2008), travel agents behave ethically and responsibly in order to satisfy the need of tourists, employers, and a social ethic. Lovelock (2008) concluded that travel agents play an important role as “moral mediators when faced with a number of alternative choices that benefit or harm various stakeholders” (p. 341). Similarly, Pennington-Gray, et. al (2005) argued that travel agents can contribute to the sustainable tourism by providing detailed information about responsible behaviors at the tourism destination and educate tourists about the various impacts of their behaviors.

The Determinants of Attitudes toward CSR

A thorough review of the literature suggests that personal characteristics of employees may affect their attitudes toward CSR. These characteristics include gender (Arlow 1991; Burton and Hegarty 1999), age (Arlow 1991), education (Hage 1980; Serwinek 1992; Quazi 2003), and length of work experience (Aldag and Jackson 1977; Arlow 1991). Below is a review of the literature related to these characteristics, as well as the related hypotheses.

Gender

The influence of gender on CSR is inconsistent. Some researchers have argued that females exhibit more caring attitudes (Aupperle 1984; Ibrahim and Angelidis 1991; Kraft and Singhapakdi 1995), show higher ethical judgment (Akaah 1989), and have a tendency to be less supportive of unethical behaviors (Ruegger and King 1992) than males. However, some scholars have found that gender does not play a role in ethical attitudes, arguing that females use different modes of moral reasoning than males (Dawson 1997). Dawson (1997) found that females in a sample of 203 responded in a more ethical fashion than males to six of twenty scenarios. However, males responded more ethically than females in two scenarios. Likewise, McDonald and Kan (1997) found no difference between the ethical responses of males and females on ethical attitudes.

Hypothesis 1: There is significant relationship between gender of travel agents and their attitudes toward CSR in tourism.

Age

Regarding the role of age on CSR, mixed findings were revealed (Serwinek 1992; Deshpande 1997; Quazi 2003). Generally, the studies suggested attitudes of CSR have varied by age based on the assumption that older people are more conservative. For example, Longnsecker, McKinney, and Moore (1989) found that younger people tended to be less sensitive in their moral judgments than older people. Similarly, Serwinek (1992) revealed that older employees were stricter with ethical rules than younger people. McDonald and Kan (1997) supported this finding that older adults tended to have stronger ethical beliefs. However, in a study examining Australian managers, Quazi (2003) found that age did not affect attitudes toward CSR.

Hypothesis 2: There is significant relationship between the age of travel agents and their attitudes toward CSR in tourism.

Education

The relationship between education and CSR also yielded various results. Hage (1980) found that managers with higher educational levels tended to have more liberal attitudes. Likewise, Quazi (2003) reported that the higher the

level of education the more likely respondents were to understand the issues of CSR. He suggested that educated managers were exposed to broader perspectives which may help with a better understanding of topic. However, some studies (Kidwell, Stevens, and Bethke 1987; Serwinek 1992) found that education level was not a determinant of attitudes toward social responsibility.

Hypothesis 3: There is significant relationship between education level of travel agents and their attitudes toward CSR in tourism.

Length of work experience

Regarding length of work experience, previous studies found mixed results. While most studies found that an employee with more work experience might exhibit greater ethical tendencies, other studies have found no relationship. Harris (1990) argued that the workers with ten or more years of work experience in an organization are less tolerant of unethical behaviors. McDonald and Kan (1997), however, revealed that an individual with more business experience is more likely to disagree with unethical activities. However, in contrast, Arlow (1991) found no significant relationship between the length of work experiences and attitudes toward social responsibility.

Hypothesis 4: There is significant relationship between work experience in the tourism industry between travel agents and their attitudes toward CSR in tourism.

METHODS

Data Collection

The sample for this study was U.S. travel agents from the American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA) who attended *The Tradeshow 2008* in Orlando, Florida, from September 7 to 9, 2008. ASTA is the world's largest association of travel suppliers consisting of airlines, hotels, car rental firms, cruise lines, and tour operators. ASTA estimated that around 2500 tourism professionals from a number of countries registered for the event. Only registered members with nametags were able to enter the event venue. With the permission of the organizers of the tradeshow, survey questionnaires were distributed to potential participants entering the event venue. Of the 700 questionnaires distributed, 252 were completed, yielding a response rate of 36%. Only those who responded as either a "travel agency" or "travel agent" were selected for this study, n=149.

Measures and Procedures

The instrument for this study included six items assessing how respondents perceived socially responsible behavior in their companies (Tearfund 2000; Dodds and Joppe 2005; Henderson 2007). Items were developed based on the survey from Partnership for Global Sustainable criteria (<http://www.sustainabletourismcriteria.org/>). Examples of the items include "Tourism corporations have a responsibility to preserve the environment" and "Corporate social responsibility is particularly important for the tourism industry." And "Corporate social responsibility is hard to apply to tourism companies". The statements were positively and negatively worded, reverse scored, and were placed randomly in a single set to reduce a "halo effect" of responses. The final section of the questionnaire focused on the socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, education) of respondents and their tourism industry work experience.

Descriptive analyses were used to assess sample characteristics and attitudes about CSR among travel agents. An Independent *t*-test was used to determine gender differences across attitude scores for hypothesis 1. Hypotheses 3 through 4 were tested using one-way ANOVAs and least-square means (LSM) values were assessed for post hoc testing.

RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

The sample was composed of 64.4% females and 35.6% males. 27.9% of respondents were 51-60 years old, 31-40 and 41-50 years old each equaled 23.8% of respondents. Over 80% of respondents were well educated earning at least a college degree, and 26.2% of respondents had either advanced degrees or graduate degrees. More than half of respondents (54.4%) did not have international work experience. 40.3% of respondents stated that their job title was "owner" or "CEO." Respondents had an average of 11 years of experience in the tourism industry. A total of 29.5% of respondents had less than 3 years of experience, 22.6% had 3-9 years of experience, and almost half (47.9%) had more than 10 years of work experience in the tourism industry.

Attitudes about CSR

See Table 1 for mean scores for the attitudes about CSR in tourism. Scores ranged from 4.34 to 6.21 and travel agents showed the highest mean score ($M = 6.21$) on the item “Tourism corporations have a responsibility to enhance the quality of tourist experiences.” The lowest mean scored item ($M = 4.34$) was “Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is hard to apply for tourism companies.” Data were normally distributed around the mean, indicating that no data transformation was necessary to apply multivariate statistical techniques.

Table 1.
Attitudes of travel agents toward CSR in tourism

Items of attitudes toward CSR in tourism	Mean	SD
1. Tourism corporations have a responsibility to preserve the environment.	5.93	1.50
2. Tourism corporations have a responsibility to preserve the local culture.	6.21	1.22
3. Tourism corporations have a responsibility to enhance the quality of tourist experiences.	6.40	0.86
4. Tourism corporations have a responsibility to contribute to the economy of local community.	6.02	1.29
5. CSR is hard to apply for tourism companies.	4.34	2.06
6. CSR is particularly important to the tourism industry.	5.91	1.40

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1: There is significant relationship between the gender of travel agents and their attitudes toward CSR in tourism.

An independent samples *t*-test revealed significant relationship was identified between age of travel agents and their attitudes toward CSR in tourism (See Table 2 for *t*-test results). Across all items, female travel agents had a more positive attitude toward corporate social responsibility in tourism companies than male travel agents. Specifically, female travel agents were more likely to believe that tourism companies have a responsibility to preserve the environment ($p < 0.05$) and the local culture ($p < 0.05$). In addition, female travel agents expressed a slightly more positive attitude toward the importance of CSR in the tourism industry.

Table 2.
A *t*-test for effects of gender on travel agents' attitudes toward CSR in tourism

Socially responsible tourism attitudes	Male	Female	df	t value (<i>p</i>)	2-tail sig.
A responsibility to preserve the environment	5.58	6.13	140	-2.14	0.03*
A responsibility to preserve the local culture	5.91	6.39	140	-2.33	0.02*
A responsibility to enhance the quality of tourist experience	6.33	6.44	139	-.74	0.46
Have a responsibility to contribute to the economy of local community	5.88	6.10	139	-.96	0.34
CSR is hard to apply for tourism company	4.08	4.51	134	-1.19	0.24
CSR is particularly important for the industry	5.62	6.10	135	-1.95	0.05

* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Hypothesis 2: There is significant relationship between age of travel agents and their attitudes toward CSR in tourism.

Previous research has suggested that older respondents tend to have stronger ethical beliefs and be more sensitive to ethical issues (Longnecker, McKinney, and Moore 1989; Serwinek 1992; McDonald and Kan 1997). However, ANOVA results revealed that hypothesis 2 was rejected; an indication that age was not a significant influence on travel agents' attitudes toward CSR in tourism. See Table 3 for ANOVA results.

Table 3.
One-way ANOVA of effects of age on travel agents' attitudes toward CSR in tourism

Attitudes toward CSR in tourism		df	SS	MS	F	P
A responsibility to preserve the environment.	Between groups	5	14.71	2.94	1.31	0.26
	Within groups	134	300.26	2.24		
A responsibility to preserve the local culture	Between groups	5	10.21	2.04	1.37	0.24
	Within groups	134	200.19	1.50		
A responsibility to enhance the quality of tourist experience	Between groups	5	6.09	1.22	1.67	0.15
	Within groups	133	96.93	0.72		
Have a responsibility to contribute to the economy of local community	Between groups	5	14.90	2.98	1.8	0.11
	Within groups	133	218.09	1.64		
CSR is hard to apply for tourism company**	Between groups	5	25.05	5.01	1.15	0.32
	Within groups	129	545.55	1.23		
CSR is particularly important for the industry	Between groups	5	12.36	2.47	1.27	0.28
	Within groups	129	250.27	1.94		

** Reverse scored item

Hypothesis 3: There is significant relationship between educational level of travel agents and their attitudes toward CSR in tourism.

ANOVA testing revealed that hypothesis 3 was rejected, indicating that level of education did not significantly influence travel agents' attitudes toward CSR. See Table 4 for ANOVA results. This result is consistent with previous studies (Kidwell, Stevens, and Bethke 1987; Serwinek 1992) that found that educational level was not a determinant of social responsibility.

Table 4.
One-way ANOVA of effects of education on travel agents' attitudes toward CSR in tourism

Attitudes toward CSR in tourism		df	SS	MS	F	P
A responsibility to preserve the environment.	Between groups	4	5.23	1.31	0.57	0.68
	Within groups	133	305.19	2.29		
A responsibility to preserve the local culture	Between groups	4	2.11	0.53	0.34	0.85
	Within groups	133	206.80	1.55		
A responsibility to enhance the quality of tourist experience	Between groups	4	1.56	0.39	0.52	0.72
	Within groups	132	99.16	0.75		
Have a responsibility to contribute to the economy of local community	Between groups	4	4.00	1.00	0.58	0.68
	Within groups	132	226.93	1.72		
CSR is hard to apply for tourism company**	Between groups	4	17.02	4.25	0.98	0.42
	Within groups	128	555.66	4.34		
CSR is particularly important for the industry	Between groups	4	1.61	0.40	0.20	0.94
	Within groups	128	259.30	2.03		

** Reverse scored item

Hypothesis 4: There is significant relationship between work experience in the tourism industry of travel agents and their attitudes toward CSR in tourism.

Hypothesis 4 was supported because a significant relationship was identified within two items that indicated attitudes toward CSR were significantly related to number of years of work experience. The probability of obtaining an F value of 3.45 was 0.03 for the item "Tourism companies have a responsibility to enhance the quality of tourist experience" and the probability of obtaining an F value of 4.79 was 0.01 for "Tourism companies have a responsibility to contribute to the economy of the local community." See Table 5 for ANOVA results.

A post hoc test using least-square means (LSM) revealed significant differences between travel agents with less than 3 years of industry experience and those with more than 10 years of experience on both items (See Table 6 for LSM post hoc results). Travel agents with 3 to 9 years of work experiences differed from those with less than 3 years work experiences on the item “Tourism companies have a responsibility to contribute to the economy of local community.” The travel agents with more than 10 years of work experience indicated more supportive attitudes toward CSR on the items “Tourism companies have a responsibility to enhance the quality of tourist experience” and “Tourism companies have a responsibility to contribute to the economy of local community” than the travel agents with less than 3 years experience.

Table 5.
One-way ANOVA of effects of work experience in tourism industry on travel agents’ attitudes toward CSR in tourism

Attitudes toward CSR in tourism		df	SS	MS	F	P
A responsibility to preserve the environment	Between Groups	2	6.97	3.48	1.66	0.19
	Within Groups	136	284.92	2.09		
A responsibility to preserve the local culture	Between Groups	2	3.62	1.80	1.37	0.26
	Within Groups	136	179.06	1.32		
A responsibility to enhance the quality of tourist experience	Between Groups	2	4.93	2.46	3.45	0.03*
	Within Groups	135	96.35	0.71		
Have a responsibility to contribute to the economy of local community	Between Groups	2	13.81	6.91	4.79	0.01*
	Within Groups	135	194.60	1.44		
CSR is hard to apply for tourism company**	Between Groups	2	6.02	3.01	0.70	0.49
	Within Groups	130	558.71	4.30		
CSR is particularly important for the industry	Between Groups	2	5.28	2.63	1.35	0.26
	Within Groups	131	255.12	1.95		

* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 Level.

** Reverse scored item

Table 6.
Least-square means for work experience in tourism industry

							Post Hoc
	Less than 3 years (a)		3 to 9 years (b)		More than 10 years (c)		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
A responsibility to enhance the quality of tourist experience	6.13	1.06	6.39	0.88	6.57	0.68	c > a*
Have a responsibility to contribute to the economy of local community	5.56	1.50	6.32	1.08	6.24	1.05	b, c > a*

* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 Level.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study examined the travel agents attitudes toward CSR. Travel agencies play a critical role in guiding responsible behaviors of tourists. Thus, their beliefs and attitudes regarding CSR can lead to significant impacts on both the destination and the tourist. The findings from this study revealed travel agents hold mostly positive attitudes toward CSR. These results are consistent with the previous literature (Carlsen, Getz, and Ali-Knight 2001). Specifically, in this study, travel agents believed that the enhancement of the quality of the tourist experience is the most important corporate social responsibility of tourism companies. Socially responsible tourism companies, the professionals were more supportive of the quality of tourists’ experiences than of preserving the environment and local culture. While previous literature has generally focused on preserving the environment, travel agents generally indicated less concern for this element and more for preserving the culture. These results can be explained by Lovelock (2008), who concluded that travel agents feel a stronger responsibility to their customers and employers than to a host community. This may also be explained by the fact that travel agents are most interested in creating

satisfying, quality tourist experiences because these are highly related to the profits of their business. Interestingly, travel agents are likely to believe that CSR is hard for tourism companies to apply. This may be, perhaps, an issue of education and might be explained by the fact that most examples of CSR are within large non traveled corporations, consequently it is harder for travel agents to pull from small corporation case studies and thus see the relevance of implementing CSR.

The examination of the relationship between travel agents' profiles and socially responsible attitudes revealed that such characteristics of respondents as age, and education did not have an association with any socially responsible attitudes. Although prior studies had found a relationship between age (Longnsecker, McKinney, and Moore 1989; Serwinek 1992), and education (Hage 1980; Quazi, 2003) and attitudes toward corporate social responsibility, no such association were found among travel agents. This study found that only gender and length of work experience had significant influences on travel agents' attitudes toward corporate social responsibility. From these results, this study suggested that one's length of work experience is more important than one's job position. These results imply that the support of travel agents for socially responsible issues is linked to experience acquired in an industry environment. Thus, acquired knowledge through industry experience is the most important factor influencing a travel agent's commitment toward socially responsible issues. In light of these finding, tourism companies, tourism associations, and other training institutions (educational institutions) need to provide employees with a variety of training programs that will enhance their knowledge of CSR and how to improve behaviors. Also, periodic seminars and training programs for employees and top management on socially responsible issues may be helpful because the characteristics of the tourism industry as a fast growing industry requires continuous knowledge be supplied to practitioners. On the other hand, future study is recommended to test whether there is a direct relationship between employees' socially responsible behaviors and their attitudes.

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