KNOWING YOUR VISITOR; A SURVEY OF VISITOR TYPES.

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Understanding visitors used to be an easy task; Henry James once described all other visitors and tourists as "vulgar,vulgar,vulgar". Such condemnatory statements by the established canons of good taste left little room for amplification. In fact since 1670 when the term tourist was first coined by Lassels, tourists and people travelling outside their home area have been labelled unprincipled, conceited and dissipated. The mass tourism of the 1950s and 1960s in Europe added some other images to the stereotype; tourists who were foolish at home were more foolish abroad, they dressed inappropriately, they were loud, flashy, gauche and broke cultural rules. In the Caribbean in the 1960s the dislike of tourists was so pronounced that the tourist researcher Bryden noted with just a touch of irony that tourists were sometimes stoned in the streets.

During the last decade the stereotype of the foolish tourist has become increasingly inappropriate, tourism has been changing and tourists themselves have changed. The tourist industry presents travellers with a greater range of experiences and many people have built up a repertoire of travel and holiday experiences which make them sensitive to the nuances and subtleties of cultural contact and environmental impact. For Australians too the tourist scenarios to which we were accustomed are rapidly fading. There is a new game in the international tourist world because of changing travel patterns. In Earl's Court it is spot the Aussie, in Rome it is find the American and in

places such as Pt Douglas (North Queensland) it is try and meet a Queenslander.

To understand visitors we have to move beyond the old stereotypes and our personal biases, however useful they might have been in the past. In fact the best way to study visitors is to spend some time initially on understanding ourselves.

Human beings can be described as information processing and evaluating mechanisms. Our sensory systems are geared for monitoring rapid changes in the environment and our cortexes are richly interconnected for maximum decision flexibility. Nevertheless we are prone to some systematic sorts of bias when we deal with complex information.

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illusion illustration

When we look at visitors and tourists similar tricks are played on us by our memories and decision processes.

Biases in our perceptions and assessments.

1. We overemphasise the single case. Notable examples stand out and are taken as typical, important and needing action.

2. We do not interrelate our assessments well. For example the number of people who look at an exhibit as a percentage of those who pass by may not relate well to the time spent looking. We assume that the two factors are interrelated

when in fact they represent different kinds of successful outcomes for a display.

3. We make the error of assuming that others are just like us. From the point of view of understanding the "animal" sitting alongside you it is your best bet, but can be very unreliable, particularly when you are highly familiar with a setting and visitors are not.

4. Attempting to compensate for the point raised above, one can become elitist and argue that visitors may well like what you find to be tacky ,tasteless and inane.(e.g. National Park staff and their attitude to certain tourist activities on Green Island). They may do so but the problem remains of understanding visitors so that neither the error of assumed similarity or stereotyped inferiority is employed.

5. We all suffer from a perceptual bias which fits our values. I am predisposed to see tourism and visitors in terms of psychological theory and practice and to see applications of my interests in the sphere of visitor studies. No doubt each of you has a job role which sensitises you to preferring certain outcomes. This point can be made at two levels; if you are the buildings manager you will see visitors differently to the chief interpretive officer because the incidents you notice will be different and you will place a different value on them. It is equally noticeable when visitor studies are being read by different

staff; they often interporet them to mean "success" for their portion of the operation.

6. One of the other common errors is to assume that visitors are the same from place to place; different historic theme parks attract slightly different sorts of people and even in sections of the same park visitors may be different in their demographic and psychological characteristics.

7. Our everyday understanding of visitors is also limited by what we can see and observe. The really powerful information, how visitors are thinking and feeling, is often gleaned by inference. In every park I have visited management staff have their own category scheme for describing visitors. Frequently the categories are based on the shallow observable demographics, the old retired dears, the nuclear family, etc. It is usually difficult to break down these categories because they seem so obvious to all the people who work in that setting. The question must be asked, however, as to whether or not these easily observed divisions are a viable base for management decisions.

8. One can also argue for another error of emphasis when considering visitors. Visitors are often seen by management as the least of their problems. In running a theme park there are buildings to refurbish, staff to hire, insurance to worry about, gala events to organise, animals to breed etc. In reply to this lack of emphasis on visitor studies it is perhaps useful to paraphrase Bishop Berkeley's remark,

made incidentally while he was at Oxford(the ultimate theme park for academics) If a tree falls in the forest, and there is no-one there to hear it, will it make a sound?

So far we have highlighted a number of errors, perceptual biases in looking at visitors in intuitive or everyday terms. The reason many of these errors occur is that humans need quick, ready reference systems for labelling the social world and dealing with others. It appears that an economy of effort principle dominates our way of thinking and that unless we can replace the stereotypes of visitors with other images, then the old views and errors will creep back into our way of summarising others. The goal of this presentation may therefore be summarised as attempting to shake up the stereotypes and images of visitors you hold AND replacing those images with new more fruitful ways to deal with large groups of strangers with whom you have to work and mentally accommodate.

In order to challenge the pre-existing images you hold of visitors I will deal with three kinds of information in this presentation. First, I will outline a number of concepts and approaches I have found useful in studying visitors and tourists. Second, I will document some of the methods used to gain information about visitors in theme park and tourist settings and finally I will place some

emphasis on the interpretation of information from visitor studies and analyses.

Concepts for understanding visitors.

Who are they?

The solution to this simple question takes us quickly to the murky area of categorising people into meaningful groups.

Slides of different tourist styles

I have objected already to an emphasis on demographics alone. Information on age, sex, origin of visitor, even occupation and educastional level are certainly not irrelevant but this information needs to be treated in a holistic fashion. Otherwise one encounters the following dilemna.If we know that our male visitors dislike shopping but that our older visitors like shopping what do our older male visitors like? Clearly whatever approach we adopt to visitor categorisation it must deal with whole people or units.

The first holistic approach to classifying visitors is to use combinations of demographic information. As an aside in discussing visitor studies I will not refer to work I have done at Australian theme parks for confidentiality reasons but I trust you can make the connections between the

examples and the local situation. The clusters of demographics approach thus gives us information like:

Older interstate bus tour visitors with a short time stay, concerned with food and not walking too far.

Another category might be :

Young couples chiefly interested in each other with medium time stay and money to spend.

At the more sophisticated end of this type of scheme you can produce an overall image of the similarities of different types of visitors since some groups are clearly more similar than others. As an example take the sample area of Japanese and Australian tourists and how these peoiple are seen by other tourists. The principle here can be generalised to sets of theme park visitors, sets of tourists to a region or a number of other levels of application.

Slide of tourist roles classification

With information on clusters of visitors such as outlined above one can begin a whole range of planning initiatives and evaluation exercises and focus differentially on the known clusters of visitors. For example you can ask how satisfied are people in clusters A, B and C? One can look for the generality or specificity of satisfaction across clusters, particularly if they have been

organised into a spatial pattern of similarity as shown in the tourist roles diagram.

The suggestions above are a good start to understanding visitors but I have not as yet really introduced any key concepts to guide the studies theoretically. I will do this by suggesting that an improvement to the above scheme is possible by further refining the cluster approach using the concept of visitor motivation.

The topic of motivation is a classic area of psychological study and needs to be treated cautiously.The popular image of psychologists having special powers or insights into people's conscious and unconscious motivation is little more than an elaborate confidence trick in the arena of professional prestige. While psychologists may not have any special mystical powers, 100 years of defining the concept has at least been useful for visitor analysis. Historically motivation has always been conceived as either biologically driven(internal needs which must be satisfied) or self directed in a cultural context(needs for achievement, status, power as determined by our cultural norms). This distinction can be summarised as a push versus pull approach to motivation. Conceptually this is fine, but creates all sorts of problems when we attempt to measure or assess people's motivation. Three problems are readily recognised. You can't ask people because some of the push and pull factors are outside their conscious awareness. There is a time frame problem in posing a motivational

question, for example why are you here today? You can answer in an immediate sense, in terms of your motivation at work or in terms of your personal life history. Some of the more ludicrous accounts of motivation in the travel motivation literature have confused these kinds of time frames (The noted biologist Julian Huxley claimed that we favour seaside holidays because we evolved from marine mammals sometime in the Pleistocene and this impells us to imitate fur seals in enjoying the tidal margins). The second problem is that there is a measurement effect or impact in asking about motivation. Socially acceptable answers are more likely and you may in the way you ask the question and who you are as an interviewer shape the kind of answer you receive. It is analagous to asking the question what are you thinking about right now; the process of giving an answer will change what the person is thinking about. The third problem is that motivation can work at several levels at once; a person can be visiting a theme park to have fun with a child, to see a special building technique and to fill in an afternoon.

If we hesitate to measure motivation prospectively because of all these reasons it is nevertheless possible to make a better job of exploring motivation retrospectively. That is we can ask people for their descriptions and accounts of their visits and infer from these best and worst episodes some of the implicit motivations people describe. I have been involved in a research project collecting such travel stories for 4 years and we have developed on the

basis of these stories a motivational framework which meets the needs of tourist studies.

The central notion is that people have travel careers or levels of implicit motivation for visiting holiday settings. These motivation levels are organised hierarchically. People may have motivational levels below their highest level but are unlikely to enjoy activities and experiences pitched above their motivational level.

Travel careers slide

Since historic theme parks are large establishments with numerous subcomponents it is probable that visitors at any of the motivational levels described can enter the theme park gates. It is important to reflect on the point that the categorisation of visitors by career level is quite independent of demographic considerations. It is therefore possible that we will have both older and younger physiological level tourists and special interest tourists(say steam train enthusiasts) who may be either 9 or 90.

This temporary excursion into the topic of motivation measurement has rich implications for building a descriptive framework to categorise visitors. The best kind of visitor profile will be one which divides visitors into similar types based on their motivation level and hence their

approach to visiting the specified environment. Such groups of people may or may not have a similar demographic profile. In answering the question "Who are they?", we have in effect also answered the question ,"Why do they come?" because it has been argued that the most complete description of the visitor is in terms of their motivation level which is inferred from an assessment of their reactions to the specific experiences on offer in any given setting.

What might such a category scheme of visitors look like? An example taken from an English setting may help illustrate the approach and its details. The setting is the Cotswold Farm Park near Chipping Sodbury. Its content is the display of rare breeds of British Farm animals in a natural setting with the aims of conserving such breeds,informing modern farmers of their existence and educating urban dwellers about the historical changes in British farming.

You approach this visitor profile study by eliciting from visitors over an extended period their summaries of the best and worst features of the setting. These are best handled by getting people to write short free form accounts of their reactions to the setting. Then using the travel career framework as a guiding principle, a kind of super grid or content analysis, one can code the several hundred written descriptions into categories according to which sorts of motivations they imply or contain. The negative experiences are as valuable as the positive here because they can be used to assess which kinds of needs are being

denied or frustrated. The frequency of coded responses in the different motivational level categories provides an account of the character of the audience currently using the setting. The motivational level information can be cross coded with the demographic material. In the Cotswold setting it was possible to describe four major groups;

1. Young families out for rest, relaxation, children's entertainment and a picnic.
2. Older farmers and their wives, local to the area, with a specific historical interest in the changes to the area and the quality of the animals on display.
3. International tourists, usually self touring, lured by local advertising with a desire to see something authentically British.
4. Geneticists, agricultural research personnel and animal lovers intensely interested in the specific breeding programmes, limited gene pools and commercial possibilities of the stock on display.

It can be claimed that if you understand your visitors this well, then planning for the satisfaction and well being of all such groups is possible.

One further conceptual notion central to my approach to tourist and visitor studies is the proposal that there should be a fit or match between the visitor and the visited setting. That is, the activities offered should fit the expectations or motivational levels of the tourists. In the theme park example described above, the lack of picnic

facilities was a major handicap for the young families group and it took some time before this was rectified. This does not mean to imply that the visitors needs are always paramount. There might be a very good reason for discouraging picnickers or physiological level tourists from a theme park since the modifications needed to suit their needs do not fit the overall goals of the setting. Nevertheless if the visitor profile study indicates that there are groups of visitors who are mismatched with the experiences available in the setting there is a need to change because few environments can afford to turn away a group of dissatisfied consumers. A parallel can be drawn here with an early study we conducted on Brampton and Hinchinbrook Islands where mismatched tourists were shown to exist in both settings. One island chose to redevelop its activities while the other sought to clarify its image and attract more appropriately motivated visitors.

It is not the aim of this presentation to describe the work we have been doing on the design of activities for tourists but let me briefly mention that in trying to create the match between visitor groups and the presentation of the historical setting some emerging findings appear to be that activities need to be

1. emotionally varied(some quiet, passive and low key, others involved, noisy, boisterous)

2. mentally involving or mindfulness inducing(activities where people have to think, work out answers and attend in detail to the scene in front of them)
3. be accessible to people in terms of clear directions, perceived ease of participation and likely outcomes and with the time clearly noted.

There are probably some members of this audience with whom I have been involved in the design of tourist activities. It is only in the last few months that I have gone back and examined those activities and tried to develop a model of why some worked and some did not. I am making some progress with this topic but it is not always perfectly predictable.

The final parts of the presentation are critical for those of you planning, paying for, or simply reading visitor studies.

You need to always ask three questions in the area of visitor studies.

1. Is the information reliable? That is will it be replicated in another study or are there some quirks in the data collection which jeopardise its value. I find many people overly concerned with the issue of sample size here. Certainly there are few studies where a sample of less than 250 produces truly reliable information but 800 people are not much more valuable than 300. When concerned with reliability, questions such as seasonal distribution, the use of multiple methods to cross reference information and

the kinds of personal contact involved in the data collection are just as significant.

2. The second issue is one of validity. Does the study really answer the question(say of satisfaction) or does it answer something like satisfaction? (e.g. comfort or lack of displeasure). Multiple measures are again best to construct indices of key visitor variables.

3. Is the information useful? This is referred to as the "so what" issue and should really be addressed in the planning phase of the visitor study. There is quite simply no point in collecting data which you do not intend to use. The studies done by the Six Flags Over America theme parks organisation are good examples of detailed assessments of visitors but why ask Did you like our location? when the likelihood of relocating is infinitesimable.

I began this presentation by suggesting that to understand visitors we need to look at ourselves. I will conclude it by suggesting that if you follow the processes and procedures discussed to understand visitors you may indeed proceed in the other direction; by understanding visitors you may better understand yourself.