Introduction

The tourism destination provides a geographically bounded locality, whether at a national, regional or local level, in which economic and social interactions take place and which embraces the idea of ‘community’ (Tinsley and Lynch, 2007: 16).

The major goal of destination marketing research is to understand the nature of the interaction between visitors and tourism providers at the destination, which naturally represents both the demand and supply sides of tourism. In today’s highly competitive leisure travel market, the need for accurate, timely and relevant information is essential for both emerging and established destinations to stay competitive and also increase their share of the leisure travel market.

Marketing research helps the Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) to make better informed and less risky marketing and management decisions. Accordingly, the information obtained through marketing research must be objective, impartial, translatable, current and relevant.

This chapter explores the destination marketing research process and the six steps that are involved in conducting research, and discusses the nature of marketing research, emphasizing its role of providing information for marketing decision making.

Importance of destination marketing research

Marketing research is the systematic and objective identification, collection, analysis, dissemination, and use of information for the purpose of improving decision making related to the identification and solution of problems and opportunities in marketing (Malhotra, 2015: 28).

Clearly, any destination marketer with a market orientation conducts research to gain insight into their visitor market. Research results greatly contribute to creating long-term marketing plans; help set organizational goals and policies; can help communicate the DMOs role in contributing to the local economy in terms of visitor spending, tax revenues, and jobs supported.

The research function calls for (1) the design and development of research programs that track, analyze, and explain key trends and market conditions; (2) direct performance reporting programs to provide accurate assessment of program effectiveness; (3) the management of a
communications program; and (4) the DMOs to act as a liaison with government officials and tourism industry principals in developing cooperative marketing programs.

**Destination marketing research in practice**

The most common activities in which destination marketing researchers engage are:

*Visitor volume measurements, market share measurements, and visitor profiles.* One way to identify a destination’s customer base is by conducting a study that deals with the questions: To whom should we sell our destination? How do we find them? What do we tell them about the destination so they will come? The more information it can gather about its visitors, the more likely the DMO and its stakeholders will be able to successfully produce tourism products of interest and communicate them in compelling ways.

Key attributes of visitors include: where they live, spending, mode of transportation, demographics (age, gender, marital status, level of education, occupation, household income or individual income), ethnicity, social class, family life stage, type of tourist (leisure/business, domestic/international), leisure activities, type of accommodation selected, size of travel group, length of stay, purpose of trip, time of visit, source of information used.

**Destination brand image studies** can help a DMO to understand how a destination is perceived by visitors, how consumers feel about it (Tasci and Gartner, 2007).

Key attributes that can be studied are: the effect of visitation, segmentation, image differences between different groups, the effect of distance from the destination, intermediaries, induced images, top of mind awareness/decision sets, culture, temporal image change, positive/negative images, the effect of familiarity with the destination, less developed destinations, event impact, value, image formation, experience, stereotypes, budget travelers, intent to visit and DMO’s policy. (Martín-Santana, Beerli-Palacio and Nazzareno, 2017: 14).

*A visitor impact study* is the most important research a DMO can undertake because it is a direct measure of the organization’s operational effectiveness in generating revenue for its members and local community.

*Forecasting* is an attempt to estimate the most likely level of visitor volume and demand based on economic, market, and social conditions and circumstances.

**Tourism barometers** can help track trends on a weekly, monthly, or yearly basis. They can include airport arrivals, hotel occupancy, ticket sales at local attractions, or information inquiries.

The **marketing and communications performance** assessment looks at: number of programs, reach, frequency, impressions, co-op activity, in-kind services, online activity, media public relations, press releases, media interviews, newsletters, and events staged.

The **advertising and promotions performance** assessment measures the number of inquiries or fulfillments, Web site activity, bookings, and direct sales.

**Destination marketing research process**

In undertaking research, there is a sequence of steps called the research process, which can have followed when designing the research process. If they are correct, the research stands a good chance of being both useful and appropriate and if they bypassed or wrong, the research will almost surely be wasteful and irrelevant.

According to Malhotra 2015: 31 the marketing research process consists of six steps:

**Step 1:** Problem/opportunity identification and formulation

**Step 2:** Development of an approach to the problem
Step 3: Research design formulation
Step 4: Fieldwork or data collection
Step 5: Data preparation and analysis
Step 6: Report preparation and presentation

**Step 1: Problem/opportunity identification and formulation**

The first step of the research process is to define the problem/opportunity being addressed. This is crucial to ensure that any information collected is relevant.

Proper definition of a problem provides guidance and direction for the entire research process. Problem definition begins with discussions with the key decision maker(s).

In some cases, this is related to a gap in researcher knowledge or destination problems, concerns and opportunities.

We can usually observe that many tourists visit the destination, but we often know very little about their motivations for doing so, why they visit particular sites or what factors influenced their decision to travel. These are important questions from a social science point of view (finding out more about human behaviour) as well as from an economic perspective (how can we manage and market cultural facilities more effectively to increase tourist satisfaction, repeat visitation and spending?) (Richards and Munsters, 2010: 16).

**Step 2: Developing an approach to the problem**

As well formulating an aim, specific research questions (objectives) should be stipulated at the outset (Seaton and Bennett, 2000: 90).

The research objectives describe the purpose of the research and give direction to a researcher regarding what needs to be accomplished.

An *analytical model* is a set of variables and their interrelationships designed to represent, in whole or in part, some real system or process. *Graphical models* are visual and pictorial and are used to isolate variables and to suggest directions of relationships but are not designed to provide numerical results (Malhotra, 2015: 70).

Research questions (RQs) are refined statements of the specific components of the problem (Malhotra, 2015: 71).

A hypothesis (H) is an unproven statement or proposition about a factor or phenomenon that is of interest to the researcher (Malhotra, 2015: 71). Often, a hypothesis is a possible answer to the research question.

The establishment of hypothesis is the foundation of conducting research and is a valuable step in the problem solving process (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2012: 502)

The information needs is a list of the specific information that must be found to meet the research objectives. By focusing on each component of the problem and the analytical framework and models, research questions, and hypotheses, the researcher can determine what information should be obtained.

**Step 3: Formulating a research design**

A research design is a framework or blueprint for conducting the marketing research project. It details the procedures necessary for obtaining the information needed to structure or solve marketing research problems (Malhotra, 2015: 84).
Based on the problem definition, the researcher selects one or more of the basic research designs; these are exploratory, descriptive, and causal research.

When the researcher has little or no knowledge about the phenomenon to be investigated, exploratory research approach is the most appropriate research methodology to discover ideas and insights, and isolate key variables and relationships for further examination. Basic methods of exploratory research are: Secondary data analysis and Qualitative research.

**Determine the sources of data**

Primary data, secondary data or both can be used in research. Primary data are the new data gathered specifically for the project at hand. Secondary data are available data, already gathered for some other purpose.

One of the biggest mistakes made in marketing research is to collect primary data before exhausting what can learned from the information available in secondary sources.

The wide range of secondary data sources of interest to DMOs include:

- Central and local government statistics (census data used by marketers as part of geodemographic and lifestyle market segmentation).
- International organization reports such as by the WTTC, WTO, IATA, ICAO, UN, OECD, Eurostat.
- Commercial sources reports, such as Euromonitor, Travel and Tourism intelligence (TTI), Marketing Intelligence (MINTEL). For example, Euromonitor is specialized in international consumer market analysis, and part of their portfolio includes travel and tourism. It produces emerging market, market direction and international market intelligence reports.
- The academic literature (books, scientific journals, periodicals, master and PhD thesis).
- Internal records of DMOs.
- Trade associations, such as hotels, travel agents, tour operators and airlines, hold information on their members and the market.
- The news media.
- Internet.
- Syndicated marketing research services (*Syndicated services* are companies that collect and sell common pools of data of known commercial value designed to serve a number of clients Malhotra 2015: 97)

**Qualitative research**

Qualitative research is an unstructured, exploratory research methodology based on small samples that provides insights and understanding of the problem setting (Malhotra 2015:61).

*Focus groups* are the most popular form of qualitative research in destination marketing and management. Issues are explored from the perspective of various stakeholder groups, particularly residents, providers and managers (Echtner and Ritchie, 1993; Haukeland, Daugstad and Vistad, 2011; Mackay and Fesenmaier, 1997; Mackenzie, 2012; Pearce and Schänzel, 2013; Perdue, 2000; Salk, Schneider and McAvoy, 2010; Singal and Uysal, 2009). It involves interviewing eight to 12 people in an informal setting and uses open ended questions. It led by a trained moderator, who wants to get group interaction, to stimulate critical thinking and get immediate reactions. A typical session lasts from 90 minutes to two hours. The group is taped (either audio or video) so researcher can later analyze the discussion, looking for common themes.
In destination marketing and management research can be undertaken with online focus groups (four to six participants), because they remove geographical constraints and decrease costs.

**Depth interviews** are another method of obtaining qualitative data. The interviews are lengthy, freewheeling discussions between a researcher and an individual. Depth interviews are effective in situations that involve detailed probing of respondents, discussion of sensitive topics, or where strong social norms exist. They are unstructured or semi structured. They are used by some researchers in/or not in combination with quantitative research (Gartner and Ruzzier, 2011; Hanlan and Kelly, 2005; Hankinson, 2004, 2009; Hem and Iversen, 2004; Klenosky, Gengler and Mulvey, 1999; Komppula, 2014; Kruja and Hasaj, 2010; Kruja and Gjyrezi, 2011; McKercher, Wong and Lau, 2006; Tinsley and Lynch, 2001.)

**Delphi Technique** may be characterized as “a method for structuring a group communication process so that the process is effective in allowing a group of individuals to deal with a complex problem” (Linstone and Turoff, 1975: 3).

The Delphi technique was developed by Rand Corporation.

A small group of experts must respond independently in a designated time-frame to a problem scenario. After each round, the information is consolidated and edited. Unlike focus groups, the respondents do not converse with the other study participants, but they are given feedback from the other respondents after each set of questions.

*(Kaynak, Bloom and Leibold, 1994: 19)*

The Delphi technique is one qualitative technique which had been used with substantial success in predicting tourism demand and potential, where convergence of expert opinion is the underlying criterion to produce more precise projections. The Delphi technique is suitable to use when dealing with uncertainties in an area of imperfect knowledge.

Lin, Liu and Song, 2015, based on 46 studies, reviewed the application of the Delphi technique in tourism forecasting within top tourism and hospitality as well as management and forecasting research publications over the past four decades. The application of the Delphi forecasting technique has generally been categorized into three broad categories: event forecasting, forecasting tourism demand, and forecasting future trends/market conditions, but the third has been identified as the most popular application (Lin, Liu and Song, 2015: 1126). Specifically, they concluded that Delphi has been widely applied in projecting potential market trends or conditions, predicting the likelihood or the time of the occurrence of specified events and their impact on tourism, and forecasting tourism demand (e.g. Hawkins, Shafer, and Rovelstad, 1980; Kaynak and Macaulay, 1984; Kaynak, Bloom, and Leibold, 1994; Kaynak and Marandu, 2006, 2011; Kaynak and Pathak, 2006; Kaynak and Cavlek, 2007; Katsura and Sheldon, 2008; Kibedi, 1981; Pan et al., 1995; Seely, Iglarsh, and Edgell, 1980; Tideswell, Mules, and Faulkner, 2001).

There is a limited use of statistical techniques (e.g. mean, median, interquartile, standard deviation and statistical tests) in exploring and analyzing the results of Delphi techniques. As a result, this technique can be conducted in combination with one or more of the quantitative methods.

The basic interview can be supplemented in a number of ways:

**Repertory grid analysis** was developed almost 80 years ago. Repertory grid is a method of investigating an individual’s world view that allows them to express their opinions in their own terms. Its application in destination research has been discussed by several authors (e.g. Embacher and Buttle, 1989; Hankinson, 2004, 2005; Timmermans, Heuden and Westerveld, 1982; Pike, 2003, 2007; Walmsley and Jenkins, 1993).

**Q methodology** was invented by the psychologist William Stephenson in the 1930s, and most applications of Q methodology have been within psychology (Stephenson, 1953).
Q methodology represents an attempt “to analyze subjectivity, in all its forms, in a structured and interpretable form” (Barry and Proops, 1999: 339). Q-method may open up possibilities for contemporary tourism researchers, to enhance the nature and richness of the methodological alternatives for developing tourism knowledge (Stergiou and Airey, 2011: 319).

The first attraction of Q-methodology to tourism researchers is its emphasis on the subjective, lived experiences of individuals (Stergiou and Airey 2011: 317). It used from some authors in destination research (e.g. Davis, 2003; Dewar, Li and Davis, 2007; Fairweather and Swaffield, 2001, 2003; Hugé et al., 2016; Stringer, 1984).

The projective techniques are an unstructured, indirect form of questioning that encourages respondents to project their underlying motivations, beliefs, attitudes or feelings regarding the issues of concern (Malhotra, 2015: 132).

According to Hussey and Duncombe

projective techniques can be used to overcome communication barriers among the respondents, such as lack of awareness of repressed motivations; inability to express themselves; unwillingness to disclose certain feelings; irrationality, and subjects trying to say the right things to please the interviewer.

(1999: 23)

Hussey and Duncombe, 1999; Prayag, 2007; Usakli and Baloglu, 2011; Wagner and Peters, 2009; and Wassler and Hung, 2015 used projective techniques in their destination research.

Wassler and Hung (2015) employ three projective techniques in their research to personify brand-as-person and brand-as-user for two tourist destinations, namely:

- *word association* (the respondents are usually asked to cite the images or thoughts that first come to their minds),
- *sentence completion* (respondents are given incomplete sentences and asked to complete them), and
- *brand personification* (brand personification is a technique that directly assigns human traits to a brand. In this case, the respondents are encouraged to create mentally a human metaphor for a specific target).

(Wassler and Hung, 2015: 846)

Projective techniques can be used in conjunction with focus groups and depth interviews to obtain responses that subjects would be unwilling or unable to give if they knew the purpose of the study.

**Descriptive research**

If a problem is precisely and unambiguously formulated, descriptive and causal research is needed. Descriptive research is used when we study how often something occurs or what, if any, relationship exists between two variables. The researcher might seek to learn whether men or women more often select vacation destinations. Methods of descriptive research are: surveys; panels; and observational and other data.

The observational method relies upon the direct observation of physical phenomena in the gathering of data (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2012: 511).

Facts and figures may be obtained by human and mechanical devices. Observation provides an opportunity to collect data about behavior as it actually occurs, but does not tell you why the
subjects are doing it. Observation cannot delve into motives, attitudes, or opinions. Observation methods can be used but are rarely reported in the destination marketing literature.

Descriptive research designs generally employ surveys to learn the beliefs and thoughts, behavior, intentions, attitudes, awareness, motivations, and demographic and lifestyle characteristics of people being studied and is usually based on a questionnaire. The advantage of a survey is that information comes directly from the people you are interested in. Survey research is the most common method of collecting quantitative data, which is relatively easy to collect and lends itself easily to statistical analysis.

The survey method through questionnaire can be conducted by the telephone (traditional telephone, computer-assisted telephone interviewing-CATI); by mail (mail/fax interview, mail panel); in person (mall intercept, in home, computer-assisted personal interviewing-CAPI) or electronic (email, internet).

Telephone surveys generally have the advantages of being cheap, the physical appearance of the interviewer does not matter and potential sample size is huge (since most people have access to a telephone) (Finn, Walton and Elliott-White, 2000: 93). The primary advantage of this survey is the speed and low cost. Computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) using random dialing is growing at a rapid pace. A limitation of telephone surveys is that the interview must be short.

The mail questionnaire is useful when extensive questioning is necessary the respondent can complete the questionnaire at their convenience; when large geographical areas must be covered and when it would be difficult to reach respondents (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2012).

Mail surveys provide no direct contact between the researcher and the respondent. This often results in a lack of motivation to respond, but sometimes the respondents may be more willing to fill in sensitive information, such as personal or family characteristics, because they can remain anonymous. They may be more likely to give truthful and honest responses. The questions must be simple and easy to follow, since no interviewer is there to help and the likelihood of misunderstandings and incomplete answers is increased. A major problem with mail surveys is the compilation of an appropriate and accurate mailing list.

Personal interviews are more flexible than telephone or mail interviews. Interviewers can probe more deeply if an answer is incomplete or unclear. Researchers need to be careful that having an interviewer involved doesn’t affect the respondent’s answer. Often the techniques can be combined. In destination marketing research, the tourists or visitors may be interviewed face to face on arrival about their expectations and at the end of the interview, handed a self-completion questionnaire to be completed at the end of their visit to ascertain experiences and levels of satisfaction and returned by post.

Electronic interviews are Web and mobile questionnaires delivered via a Web Link. This normally uses email or a web page to display the hyperlink (Web link) to the questionnaire and is dependent on having a list of addresses.

Designing the research instrument: questionnaire

The value of a survey questionnaire rests with its design (Seaton and Bennett, 2000: 97).

Deciding on the method of data collection that is right for the research being planned is not easy. The researcher must take into consideration the objectives of the research; must translate the marketing problem into a set of research questions that identify exactly what information is required; determine the appropriate target respondents; decide what data collection methods will be used to survey the respondents; identify any existing constraints (for example, time and budget), and the characteristics of the subject population.
Key attractions of questionnaires to destination researchers include:

- a standardized instrument can be used by multiple interviewers
- ease of administration of large samples
- relatively low cost, particularly using internet-based applications
- large geographic flexibility
- availability of data analysis techniques
- the ability to generalize results to the wider population of interest.

(Pike, 2008: 143)

Tour operators could give out questionnaires to holidaymakers on the flight home; airlines too adopt this approach capitalizing on having a captive audience whose views on the product/service is at the forefront of their minds, and visitor surveys have applied in the same rationale (Seaton and Bennett, 2000: 65).

Questions wording is important as questions should be written with the potential respondent in mind. Vocabulary, reading level and simple words all must be considered.

Basic principles of the “art” of asking questions are:

1. Be clear and precise
2. Response choices should not overlap and should be exhaustive
3. Use natural and familiar language
4. Do not use words or phrases that show bias
5. Avoid double-barreled questions
6. State explicit alternatives
7. Questions should meet criteria of validity and reliability

The two principal question formats are: open and closed questions.

Open question – The respondent is free to write the answer on blank lines below the question. For example:

Please state below the main reason for your visit to this destination.

Closed question – the respondent chooses one or more alternatives of answers represented in questionnaire. The alternatives must be defined clearly and meaningfully to the respondents. Sometimes, you can add alternatives: Other (please specify) . . . , don’t know, not sure, etc.

What is the major reason for your visit to this destination? Please check one category only.

1. Recreation
2. Business
3. Sightseeing
4. Visit relatives and friends
5. Health
6. Other (please specify) . . .

Question scaling is used to measure the attitudes or opinions of respondents. Semantic differentials and Likert scales are the most commonly used techniques in these surveys.
The Likert scale is most popular for easier construction and administration. Likert scale requires respondents to indicate the level of agreement or disagreement with a statement/s concerning a particular object. A typical five-level Likert item, is:

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the destination X is very attractive?

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

Semantic differentials scale combines verbal and diagrammatic techniques by inserting opposing adjectives at either end of the scale such as “bad–good”, “strong–weak”, “hot–cold” and so on (Finn, Walton and Elliott-White, 2000: 96).

The normal questionnaire layout is to begin with the easier questions and move to the more difficult or complicated questions. The sensitive and personal questions are normally placed at the end of a questionnaire.

All questionnaires should be pilot tested (pretested) prior to their delivery to assess the validity and likely reliability of the questions (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016: 482).

Causal research

Causal research help to understand which variables are the causes (independent variables) and which variables are the effects (dependent variables) of a phenomenon and to determine the nature of the relationship between the causal variables and the effect to be predicted (Malhotra 2015). The experiment is the main method of causal research.

While this research approach provides the greatest degree of certainty for marketers, the complex and expensive nature of experimental designs has meant that it is the least common in the tourism marketing literature. Causal relationships are extremely difficult to prove because of the difficulty in isolating and controlling the wide range of extraneous variables in the real world, which could also impact on the dependent variable at the time of the experiment.

(Pike 2008: 144)

This method in destination research was used by some authors: Gopie and MacLeod, 2009; Kim and Richardson, 2003; Lee and Lockshin, 2012; Michaels, 1993; Morley, 1994; Woodside, 1990, etc.

For example, it is possible for resort areas to run advertising experiments or pricing experiments or to develop simulation models to aid in decision making (Goeldner and Ritchie 2012: 512).

Sampling process and sample size

After deciding on the research approach and instruments, the marketing researcher must design a sampling plan.

The marketing researcher must define the target population. It is usually impossible for marketing managers to collect all information about everyone in a population. Typically, they study
only a sample — a representative part of population. Once the sampling unit is determined, a sampling frame must be developed so that everyone in the target population has an equal or known chance of being sampled.

Sample size is influenced by the availability of resources, financial support and time available to select the sample and to collect, input and analyze the data (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016: 305).

Qualitative research (it does not aim to draw statistical inference) generally uses nonrandom sampling techniques, and quantitative research (it aims to draw statistical inference) uses random sampling techniques.

A probability sample is selected in such way that every member of the population has an equal chance of being included.

Probability sampling techniques include simple random sampling, systematic sampling, stratified sampling, cluster sampling, sequential sampling and double sampling (Malhotra, 2015: 361).

Non-probability sampling techniques include convenience sampling, judgmental sampling, quota, and snowball sampling (Malhotra 2015: 361).

**Step 4: Doing field work/collecting data**

Data collection involves field work, contact with respondents. If attention is not paid to ensuring that field work is carried out carefully, the planning that went into the marketing research process to this point has been wasted. Furthermore, if conclusions are drawn based on data that is not reliable due to poor field work, the marketing decision maker may be in a worse position than if no research had been done at all.

**Step 5: Preparing and analyzing data**

To turn collected data into information, the researcher must prepare and analyze the data. Processing involves editing, coding, and data entry.

Data analysis involves applying non-statistical and statistical techniques to summarize the collected data. Its purpose is to transform the data into meaningful information that will help the marketing manager solve the problem defined at the beginning of the marketing research process.

Thematic analysis, grounded theory method and content analysis are most used approaches to analyze the qualitative data from destination researchers (e.g. Hede, 2005; Martin and Woodside, 2008; Prayag and Ryan, 2011; Ryan and Cave, 2005).

According to Pike (2002) the most popular quantitative data analysis techniques were: factor analysis, t-tests, perceptual mapping, analysis of means, cluster analysis, conjoint analysis, importance-performance analysis, and mapping techniques.

**Step 6: Preparing and presenting the report**

Finally, the researcher puts the information generated by the analysis into a report. The report should begin with a concise summary of what the research was designed to do, what the results were, and what these results mean in terms of making marketing decisions. The report should be as clear and understandable as possible. The technical details (such as detailed statistical information, sampling, questionnaire forms) should be left to the appendices of the report. Besides a written report, the marketer may request one or more oral reports.
Marketing research and social media

Today, social media has emerged as an important domain for marketing research. Social communities open new avenues for understanding, explaining, influencing and predicting the behaviors of destination visitors/tourists. One of the key developments, both in technology and behavior, relates to user-generated media (UGM). Social media has changed the rules and everyone can use them for free. This ability to create and share content, this UGM, is a key part of the social media revolution.

Key aspects of social media and marketing research include: online research communities/MROCs; community-enabled in-house panels; participatory blogs; blog and buzz mining; E-ethnography; and social networks and beyond (Poynter, 2010: 394).

Most forms of quantitative research have started to use online data collection, especially via the services of online access panels. Even though, it is still easier to list those areas where online is not a suitable medium as many qualitative researchers choose not to use online equivalents, preferring to stick to face-to-face methodologies.

In contrast to online, social media’s history is much newer and far fewer types of project are currently considered suitable. The sorts of projects that tend to use the social media medium include: ethnographic approaches; co-creational research; and ideation and alternative/additional customer feedback (Poynter, 2010: 399).

Conclusions

Destination marketing research provides the information base for effective decision making by DMOs and their stakeholders. Objective, impartial, translatable, current and relevant information helps managers to develop products, policies, plans, to operate, and control more efficiently and decreases risk in the decision making process. Useful destination marketing research depends on identification and formulation of an accurate and clear problem; research design; carefully data collection, analysis and interpretation; and reliable written report with appropriate recommendations for action.

References


