



Increasing state market share through a regional positioning

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Abstract

State tourism officials need to know more about the nature of in-state and out-of-state visitor characteristics and how actual and potential visitors perceive local destinations. The main objective of this study was to understand Virginia's image as a travel destination versus competitive states in the Mid-Atlantic region of the USA. The regional competitiveness of Virginia as a tourism destination was evaluated by creating a "perceptual map" which reveals the similarities and differences in how 10 states were rated on the 48 destination attributes included in the survey. Results showed that Virginia stands out in the quality of its natural and historical landscape; features shared by many of the surrounding competitive states. Virginia competes with Pennsylvania, North Carolina, West Virginia on natural features and competes with Pennsylvania, Maryland, South Carolina, and Georgia on historic and cultural heritage. Virginia's amenities are well known, but lack emotional impact. Possible marketing strategies would be to give Virginia a stronger emotional image, while building on its strong reputation for quality natural and cultural attractions. It is also important that destination promotional activities focus on differentiating features of places in a regional context so that complementary tourism products within the region can also be developed. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

One of the main objectives of destination promotion and competitiveness is to create a new image or reinforce an existing positive image of a place in the minds of travelers. Because of the organic nature of image, some places may need to augment supply resources to match demand and meet traveler expectations, and thus, create an enhanced image of the existing destination resources. Promoting places has never been an easy task for state tourism offices and public agencies. Several destination marketing organizations (DMOs), including convention and visitor bureaus, national and state tourism offices, and local and regional organizations, are all involved in marketing their respective places. Tourism as an experience takes place in destinations and tourists travel to destinations to see attractions, to participate in leisure activities, and to experience new cultures. Places, whether

it is a city, state, country or region within a given country, may have the desire and marketing goal to become a recognized destination, remain competitive, and increase visitation market share.

Several tourism entities throughout the world have been conducting or funding on a regular basis travel projects that are designed to provide baseline information about travelers and to develop appropriate marketing strategies and management actions. Visitor profile studies, including market assessment of, and demand for tourism destinations are most commonly conducted forms of travel studies, followed by tourism impact and conversion studies. Image and perception studies are sporadic in nature and are usually conducted once every three or five years to evaluate changes in the perception of travelers about destinations. The reason for this is that there is a general belief that images and perceptions of places may not change substantially in the short-run, and changing an existing image or creating a new one takes time. In case of major events such as Olympic games or natural disasters or wars, images of places will easily be reformed and changed quickly. The longitudinal treatments of image and perception studies

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are also reported (Mihalik & Simonetta, 1999) for monitoring purposes over time (Gartner & Hunt, 1987; Ritchie, 1984; Ritchie & Aitken, 1984; Ritchie & Lyons, 1987).

To become a recognized destination presents a difficult marketing challenge. To maintain a positive image in the minds of visitors may be even more difficult since alternative and competing destinations are always pushing the limits of market competition to maintain or capture a significant portion of the visitor market.

Indeed, state tourism officials need to know more about the nature of in-state and out-of-state visitor characteristics and how actual and potential visitors perceive local destinations. This type of information is primarily utilized in positioning or repositioning a given place in the tourism market place (Crompton, Fakeye & Lue, 1992; Gartner, 1989; Milman & Pizam, 1995). In addition, such information allows destination marketers and managers to better position themselves so that increased demand for visitation may be generated to their respective destinations.

Several studies examining images and perceptions of places as tourism destinations have been conducted (Gartner, 1993; Dann, 1996). Most, however, have studied one place at a time or a few at best to assess image or perception (Ahmed, 1994; Crompton, 1979; Gartner & Hunt, 1987; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Bignon, Hammitt & Norman, 1998; Illiewich, 1998). Some even used travel intermediaries as a proxy for visitors in order to shed light on the way potential travelers may perceive a given destination (Roehl, 1990; Gartner & Bachri, 1994; Dimanche & Moody, 1998). In addition, there have been a few studies of image that have focused on image changes of product offerings at different points in time (Gartner & Hunt, 1989) and images of different tourism resources at one point in time in a given place (Gartner & Shen, 1992). Recently, researchers also have focused on meaning and measurement of destination image (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991, 1993), the image formation process (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997), regional images (Baloglu, 1996), and sub-regional images within a given destination (Wang, 1998).

Although previous image studies have made notable contributions to the body of literature in the area of tourism management, there has been limited research examining competitive market positioning in a regional context (Pearce, 1997). One of the few studies conducted in a regional context was reported by Ashworth (1990) who examined several selected Mediterranean countries, including Cyprus, Greece, Egypt, Tunisia, Turkey, Malta and Spain. The study focused on common and differentiating features of destinations and how these countries project themselves as destinations using different image agents ranging from a travel agent to destination and resort brochures. Ashworth (1990) points out that the correspondence between the projected and received place

image and the product being developed and the consumption of that product is critical. The projected image based on similar features may show variations from place to place, and the extent to which it is received may also show variations (Baloglu, 1996; Ashworth & Voogd, 1988, 1990). Therefore, it is of great importance to destination promoters to assess their relative regional positioning in the minds of potential travelers.

The primary objective of this study was to understand Virginia's image as a travel destination versus competitive states to determine the following: (1) Virginia's relative strengths and weaknesses, (2) unique and differentiating characteristics of Virginia, and (3) areas of opportunity which would enable Virginia to win a share from competitive areas.

2. Methodology

This study was conducted in two phases. The first phase included a multicard sent out to 80,000 nationally representative National Family Opinion (NFO) households selected to conform to the latest available US census data for nine geographic divisions by market size, age of NFO member, annual household income, and household size. The survey asked respondents to list separately all pleasure and business trips taken into each of 9 Eastern and South Atlantic states and Washington, DC, during 1992. The second phase was a follow-up telephone survey conducted among an ending sample of 1318 households selected from those who responded to the mail omnibus.

The survey sample consisted of two destination strata (Virginia travelers and competitive state travelers; defined as Maryland, Washington, DC, Pennsylvania, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, and West Virginia) and five origin strata. The five origin strata were defined according to travel distance from Virginia. The origins and destinations were used to determine five "zones" that were used to classify respondents. It is important to note that these are travelers who specifically mentioned taking a pleasure trip to Virginia or the "competitive states", thus, being pre-disposed to this region.

Data were weighted prior to analysis to bring each origin-destination stratum back to its correct proportion. Weights were assigned based on the percentage of a nationally representative sample, within each travel zone, and drawn from the mail omnibus who had taken a pleasure trip to Virginia and competitive states between September 1, 1991 and August 31, 1992. Their opinions may not reflect a national base of travelers who could also choose to take a pleasure vacation outside of the Eastern and South Atlantic states.

The first part of the data analysis involved a general evaluation and descriptive summary of the data. The last

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