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Will retail travel agencies in Singapore survive: Comparison between retail travel agencies and online reservation services

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WILL RETAIL TRAVEL AGENCIES IN SINGAPORE SURVIVE: COMPARISON
BETWEEN RETAIL TRAVEL AGENCIES AND ONLINE RESERVATION SERVICES

by

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of the requirements for the

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, the tourism industry has grown rapidly. But its evolution has been influenced by various factors such as culture and environmental changes including economic status and competition. Some of these factors, culture for instance, act as constants, providing some form of predictability to the evolution of the tourism industry within a specific society. While other factors, such as economic status and competition, act as variables that drive the industry to reach its potential.

Hofstede defined “culture” as a collective programming of the human mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another (Stedham & Yamaura, 2004). Hofstede considered “national cultures” as the main mental programs that were shared by the majority of the middle class of various countries (Hofstede, 1998). The national culture in Singapore consists of a wide racial diversity. Singapore has a mosaic of several dominant cultures (Tambyah, Tan, & Kau, 2009). And it is undeniable how integral a role culture plays in the lives of many Singaporeans and in turn, it becomes almost a determining factor as to how many Singaporeans chose to spend their money, even when it comes to vacationing.

As new competitors enter the field, old ones are forced to leave; in the words of Herbert Spencer, it is “Survival of the Fittest.” An industry like tourism demands high flexibility and adaptability so as to acclimatize to the changes in the consumers’ buying behavior. But what caught the tourism industry off-guard was with the rapid advancement of technology. Technology has become a part of everyday life. It is impossible to ignore the impact technology has on the tourism market. In order to adapt to the constant changes, the tourism market has to

perform ever more efficiently, adopting new business strategies if needed, all working towards achieving a sustainable competitive edge.

The Internet is a global data information system that enables its users to narrow down and compare tons of information within seconds. It is a resourceful communication tool and for many of us, has become engrained in our everyday lives. Singapore is one of the foremost countries that thrives on technology. Mobile phones and communication technologies is a pervasive part of everyday life for Singaporeans (Tambyah, et al., 2009). The Singapore Department of Statistics, 2009, recorded the following information: in 2003, for every 1,000 population, there were 88 residential Internet broadband subscribers; and in 2008, the number of subscribers jumped to 239. These statistics not only revealed the dramatic increase in the number of internet subscribers within the last 5 years, but it also reflects the wide-spread number of Internet users in Singapore in general. This goes to show that Singaporeans are extremely adaptive to the advancement of technology, and thus, the majority of the population is considered technology savvy. This is a compelling reason for the tourism industry to be wary of the invisible competitor.

The current climate of economic downturn has basically changed the consumers' spending habit. By and large, consumers are more cautious with their spending; seeking product value and making decisions based on perceived value before they are willing to make a monetary sacrifice. This is especially true when it comes to planning a vacation. In August 2009, the National Association of Travel Agents Singapore (NATAS) organized a mega travel fair at the Singapore Expo which successfully attracted about 65,000 multicultural Singaporeans over the course of three days. According to the statistics from NATAS, the fair had generated over S\$60 million in sales of vacation packages (<http://www.straitstimes.com>). These purchases confirmed

that consumers generally seek product value and they make their purchases based on perceived value.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to describe the perceived differences in value of Singaporeans' preferences when making travel arrangements through different booking channels. This paper will explore the reasons involved in the consumer's preference to making travel arrangements through travel agents instead of using online reservation services that are not through third party websites.

Objectives

This paper will attempt to explain the semantics involved in the Singaporeans' preferences in making their travel arrangements. The outcome of this study will provide a better understanding of Singaporeans' preferences for tourist arrangements.

This study should also be of interest to the Singapore retail travel agencies as a reference tool to the future trend of Singaporeans' purchasing behavior. Singapore retail travel agencies could use this study to evaluate and develop more attractive packages and services for their consumers. This could potentially lead to an increase in the travel agencies' sales volume as well as enhance customer acquisition and customer retention.

Constraints

The success of e-commerce depends on the development of future technology and whether it will convince consumers to change their purchasing behaviors. Change in the consumers' purchasing behavior will therefore directly relate to the performance of travel agents in Singapore. The retention of customer and sales strategies are all travel agents' secret weapons, and operators may not be willing to share their secrets or confidential tourist information.

This study is limited to descriptive research. Descriptive research is conducted to reveal the nature or characteristics of consumer behavior (Zikmund, 2003). The study results will be limited to the Singaporean market and therefore cannot be generalized.

Glossary

Online reservation services. Refers to reservations made through electronic booking at independently managed websites such as United.com, Shangri-la.com, etc (Law & Leung, 2000).

Third party websites. Refer to travel related search engines site such as expedia.com, or zuji.com (Davern, 2005).

Travel product suppliers. Refer to airlines, car rental companies, and hotels (Law, Law, & Wai, 2001). For examples, Singapore Airlines, Silk air, Raffles hotel, etc.

Retail travel agencies. Refer to the principal route taken by a customers who look for a wide choice and eventual purchase of a vacation package; information for potential customers. They are also the main source of travel information for consumers (Lobo, Maritz, & Mehta, 2007).

Kiasu. A word that is a literal translation from Hokkien (a Chinese dialect), and it means “the fear of losing out” (Ho, Ang, Loh, & Ng, 1998).

Literature Review

Introduction

Traveling overseas requires individuals to spend money on air-tickets, hotel accommodation, local transportation, and even on entrances to tourist attraction places. In order for an individual or a whole family to travel overseas, it would require advanced budgeting and planning. Traveling overseas used to be a luxury spending that only wealthy people could afford. However, due to recent economic factors, traveling has become extremely affordable for more families. In Singapore, as the standard of living has risen, individuals can now afford to travel overseas for leisure. Traveling overseas has now become a very popular hobby for Singaporeans. Marketing communications senior executive of Chan Brothers' Jane Chang said 'Singaporeans love to travel' (www.straitstimes.com). Perhaps it is the economic stability, culture, or advance technologies that may have opened opportunities for Singaporeans to travel often and widely. The statistics retrieved from the Singapore Tourism Board, the number of outbound tourism for 2008 when compared to 1999 had increased dramatically (as shown in Figure 1). In 1999, the number of outbound tourists accounted for 3,971,180; and in 2008, the number doubled to 6,828,362. The fact that the outbound statistic had doubled, it showed that the outbound tourism is growing.

The growth in the use of technology such as the Internet and e-commerce has made some impact on travel agencies. However, researchers like Liao and Cheung (2000) have argued that Internet has made a limited impact on Singaporeans' way of life and that virtual retailing has yet to establish a prominent market in Singapore. There may be other significant factors that are causing consumers to turn away from local travel agents. In order for these travel agencies to survive or to succeed, they need to understand first and foremost their consumers' travel patterns

and agency usage (Kendall & Booms, 1989). With such understanding, travel agencies will be better able to efficiently change their marketing or service strategies to target the right consumer sector.

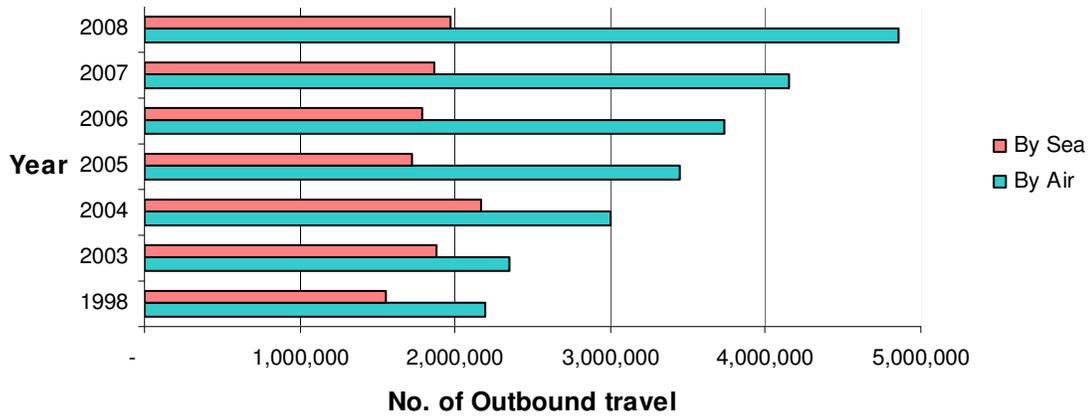


Figure 1. Singapore outbound statistics for 1999-2008

Note. Source: Yearbook of Statistics Singapore, 2009 (pp. 188).

Singapore’s standard of living

Compared to other Asian countries, Singapore is an extremely small-sized country but her residents live with an advanced and well-organized infrastructures. In a Quality of Living survey conducted by Asia Barometer in 2006 (Tambyah, Tan, & Kau, 2009), it was reported that more than two-thirds (72.2%) of Singaporeans surveyed described their standard of living as “average”; while the others surveyed described it as “high” (6.8%) or “relatively higher” (15.8) standard of living. In comparison to the other Asian countries (China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam) that participated in this 2006 survey, this is the highest percentage reported for the year.

This immense satisfaction in the standard of living has lead to the feeling of wellbeing amongst Singaporeans. By being satisfied with their standard of living, Singaporeans enjoy a certain level of enjoyment. Based on the 2006 survey, in comparison to the other East Asian

countries, Singaporeans appear to be the happiest (Tambyah et al., 2009). In term of global connection, Singapore is ranked the first in all aspects of globalization. About 50% of the Singaporeans surveyed, stated that in the past three years they had travelled at least three times either for business or vacation. As far as consumers surveyed in other countries, they claimed a percentage ranging from a mere 2% to only 17% percent. In comparison, Singaporeans are well-traveled than people from the other six East Asian countries.

In another survey conducted by Statistic of Singapore - General Household Survey (GHS) in 2005 showed that Singapore residents with higher-income had the tendency to travel overseas; 75% of the survey residents traveled overseas earned a monthly income of \$10,000 and over, and 32% of the survey residents traveled overseas with below \$2,000 monthly income. “As monthly household income from work increased, there was an increasing proportion of residents who had their holiday in more distant destination such as Europe, Australia, Japan and South Korea” (GHS, 2005, p. 20). The majority (60.2%) Singaporean residents traveled for holiday purpose, while 19.5% traveled overseas to visit relatives and friends, and 15.9% traveled due to work. Among the residents who traveled overseas, the majority of residents were older residents aged 55 years and above and younger residents aged 15-24 years. 50% of Singapore residents traveled on at least one overseas trip. It was also noted that the proportion of residents who traveled overseas declined with increasing age (GHS, 2005, p. 13).

Understanding Singapore’s culture

In order to understand consumers’ buying behavior, it is necessary to find out the factors that influence their buying decision. Kongsompong (2006) explained that the buying behavior is influenced from various sources such as commercial, biological, personal, public and personal experiential. A study by Aaker and Williams (1998) explained how cultural perceptions and

culture can manipulate the way consumers perceive marketing stimuli. It is a concern how cultural norms can manipulate consumption behavior and marketing perceptions. With the economic development and globalization, tremendous pressure is exerted on existing cultural and societal structures of countries (Stedham & Yamamura, 2004).

Singapore is a developed capitalist country with advanced economic infrastructures and customer-base (Nam, Klemz, Boshoff, & Mazibuko, n.d.). Rogers (1947) explained that in the phenomenological study, an individual's personality is shaped by interpretations of life events. In Rotter (1966) concept of "Locus of Control", it refers to people's cross-situational belief – what determines whether what is to be reinforced into their life. In his concept of "Locus of Control (LOC)", people were classified by either internal or external. Individual with external LOC would feel that they lack control of what happens to them and they would look for external controls in environment that are matching with their feelings (Kongsompong, 2006). LOC researchers also found that social influence is another powerful which may affect consumers' buying decision. LOC and social influence complement each other, Lefcourt (1982) found that internal would resist to social influence but external would yield to social cues. Kongsompong did an analysis on consumption behavior comparison between Singapore and Australia. Of the sample size of 429 participants, it was reported that Australians are more "Internal" than Singaporeans, and Australians are less socially influenced in their buying decision. The Australian was labeled as individualist while Singaporean was labeled as collectivist. Based on Hofstede's theory of individualist or collectivist, the term 'collectivist' refers to an individuals who regards a group's goal over own personal's goal and the significant partner's decision may have an effect on buying decisions. In another study, the collectivist is illustrated as more vulnerable towards value-expressive social influence, while the individualist is vulnerable

towards informational influence (Lee & Kacen, 2008). Culture has a significant influence in consumers' buying behaviors. Collectivist consumers were more satisfied with their impulse purchases, when they shop with their significant other or family (Lee & Kacen, 2008). In other words, Singapore consumers' buying decisions can be affected by social influences such as that of the spouse's or friends'. Therefore, Lee and Kacen (2008) suggest retailers to regularly host events or promotions that encourage collectivist consumers to bring their family, spouses or friends along to the event.

Could this be the reason why Singaporeans are labeled as being 'kiasu'? A direct translation from Chinese dialect, 'kiasu' means "the fear of losing out". Behavior of 'kiasuism' was connected with Singapore, and it has almost once been announced as being "hailed as a national fixation in Singapore" quoted from the Australian Macquarie Dictionary (Ho, Ang, Loh, & Ng, 1998). Some of the personality traits of 'kiasuism' are, competitive for excellence, calculative, rushing for the sales items, and greed. These 'kiasuism' traits can be seen as either negative or positive. Singaporeans can be competitive and fight to be the first, but with strive for excellence it pushes for development. The 'kiasu' awareness keep Singapore to relentless struggle for survival and in check with the economic, it is also the ability to stay ahead of competition (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000). "To get maximum value for their money or to get something for nothing" or "Free items accompanying purchases, which although is no longer a novelty, continues to be successful in playing on the weakness of individuals" (Ho et al., 1998). The headline on a local newspaper "Buy one, get one free" (Tan, 2009); a travel fair which held in August 2009, tour agents offered one-for-one deals to attract travelers. In other words, to allow travelers feel that they received the maximum value for their money – a good deal.

Singaporeans comfort level with technology

Broadband connection, Internet, and mobile phones are not unfamiliar technologies for Singaporeans. The usage of electronic communication technology is well reflected on the number of subscribers for broadband and mobile phones. The computer has become a household commodity and so has the Internet service (refer to figure 2). There are 239 broadband subscribers for every 1,000 population in Singapore for 2008 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2009). Internet users in Singapore age range from 7 to 60 years old (IDA, 2009); 69% of the total resident population is Internet users while 31% is non-Internet users (refer to figure 3). The statistic in figure 3 showed that Singaporeans ages 15 to 49 years old are regular Internet users. There is possibility for any of them to be or become a regular e-shopper.

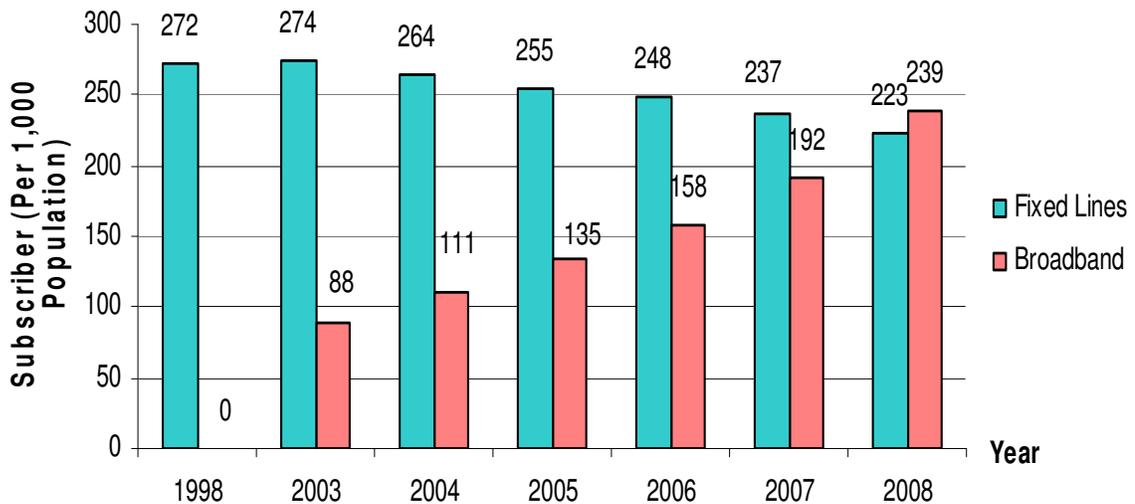


Figure 2. Singapore Internet subscriber

Note. Source: Yearbook of Statistics Singapore, 2009 (pp. 30)

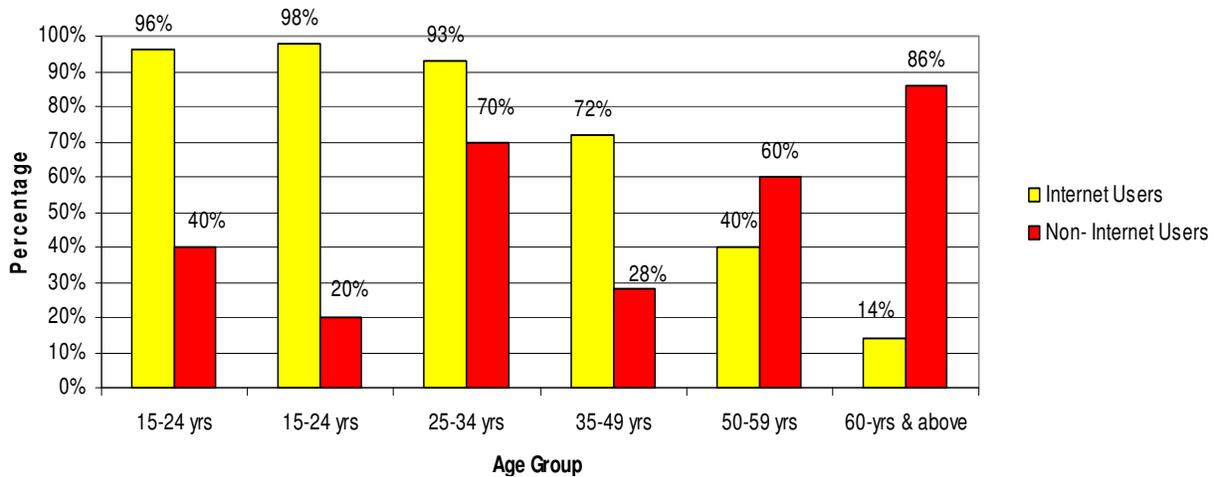


Figure 3. 2008 – Internet users group by age

Note. Source: Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore, 2009

Internet has created many advantages for the consumer. At any one time, Internet users have easy access to travel and tourism information, since there are no operation hours for online shopping. Travelers do not need to depend on travel agents for information, as now they could surf online to gather information for their vacation destination. The survey conducted in 2001, Kau et al. (2004) concluded that even though Singaporeans were well-advanced with technology, however e-commerce has not been fully adapted by Singaporeans. Out of 1,500 respondents, only 4% reported to have experience with online purchasing. This means that for the past six months, the remaining 1,040 respondents did not purchase online. Among the respondents who have made purchases during the past six months, books or magazine, gifts or flowers or hampers, and tickets for movies or concert are the top three products category.

However, Hui and Wan (2006) had a different observation. They commented that in term of e-shopping, Singapore is ahead of other south-east Asian countries. In a survey conducted by the Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore (IDA), 98% of the respondents had surfed internet before, and the number of Singaporeans who made online purchased had increased from

27% in 2005 to 36% in 2008 (IDA, 2009). IDA conducted the 2008 annual survey on Infocomm usage in household; 5,000 respondents participated in that survey. According to the data collected, Internet users' primary engaged in sending or receiving of emails followed by web browsing. Only 2% of the respondents engaged in online purchasing or goods and services. Of the 2%, respondents of age 50 to 59 years old are more active in shopping over the Internet. In terms of the value respondents spent on online purchase, a higher ratio of respondents spent between S\$200 and \$1,999 for their online purchases in 2008. Through these statistics, it showed that there is an increase in the number of Singaporeans accepting e-commerce, and that they are spending more via the Internet.

With advance technology, travel product suppliers have taken the chance to modernize their distribution methods (Law, Law, & Wai, 2001). Travel product suppliers refer to airlines, hotels, and car rental. Development of technology has provided suppliers an opportunity to reach out to consumers directly. Suppliers could place their products and start selling online. With the ability to sell directly to travelers, it has shrunk suppliers' need for travel agencies. From suppliers' point of view, e-commerce could lower their distribution cost, generate more revenue and also expose to a bigger market share (Law, Leung, & Wong, 2004). E-commerce allows travelers to go online "do-it-yourself" booking, but it also reduces suppliers' administrative cost such as commission for travel agencies (Law & Leung, 2000).

Several airlines such as Singapore airlines and British Airways have stopped paying commission to travel agents. By doing so, suppliers have direct the traffic back to airlines' own website which eliminates expenses of reservation centers, and it is the cheapest way to sell their seats (Mcgee, 2009). E-commerce threatens the survival of traditional travel agencies. Not only did travel agencies lose to gain commission from suppliers, but they also risked losing their

customers. The development of online travel reservation becomes competition for traditional travel agencies, as ultimately both are fighting for the same sector of consumers.

Consumers' attitude towards e-commerce.

There are few studies on Singaporeans' attitude toward e-commerce. Studies that were conducted in USA and Canada had various conclusions. Runyon and Steward (1987) find that people who were more educated and earned more income were more likely to search online. However, Woodside and Ronkainen (1989) research concluded that those who travel by air and upscale, white-collar travelers would use travel agencies more extensively. The scenario in Singapore is slightly different, according to the surveyed conducted by Sim and Koi (2002), their studies showed that most Singapore Internet shoppers had average monthly income between \$3,000 and \$4,000, from upper middle class families. Beside the spending power, ownership of credit card is another crucial factor that may affects the ability of consumers to shop on the Internet. Without a credit card, consumers will not be able to make payment over the Internet, and therefore no sale transaction can take place.

Unlike the United States, Singapore is an extremely small country; traveling to any part of Singapore is fast and easy. Even without owning a car, Singapore's public transportation such as buses, underground train, and taxi make traveling an ease. Therefore, traditional way of shopping is as easy as online shopping for Singaporeans. Shopping was regarded to be an organic experience and some may enjoy roaming around shopping centers to search for bargains (Liao & Cheung, 2000). Secondly, it is about the touch-and-feel of the products. It was reported that 15% of the respondents from Sim and Koi (2002) research commented to prefer real life shopping experience. In fact, 81% of the Singapore respondents who surf on Internet had never bought online; about half off the respondents who surf only window shopped on the Internet.

According to Liao and Cheung's (2000) empirical study it showed that actual product, security, price, vendor quality are factors that affect Singaporeans willingness to shop online. Overall, for products that have the "touch-and-feel" attributes are less likely to be affected by e-commerce, since those who shop online will continue to shop in-store as well. Sim and Koi (2002) study have shown that the psycho-graphic and demographic have an insignificant impact on Singaporean conventional shopping patterns.

Travel agencies in Singapore

A tourism industry includes collaboration with hotels, airlines, travel agents, visitor bureaus, etc. LeBlanc (1992) stated that in the tourism industry, travel agencies are the most important intermediaries. When it comes to purchasing vacation packages or travel arrangements, the travel agent is a helpful source to which consumers first turn to (Lobo, Maritz, & Mehta, 2007). Singapore is a small country, and with over nine hundred travel agents operating, the travel business can get very competitive. Most travel agents depend on repeat business from consumers and collaboration with trade associate to stay competitive. In order to survive the competition, travel agencies constantly analyze the market to improve their delivery system, so that it will meet customers' needs and expectation. In collaboration with the trade associate to speculate the future travel trends and anticipates the consumers' demand.

Competitiveness among the local travel agencies is harsh, and with the Internet, it adds on far more demand for travel agencies to meet up to consumers' needs. To attract consumers, even reputable travel agencies had to slash the prices for travel packages (Kui & Wan, 2005). Initially, travel agents' responsibilities were selling tickets, hotel booking, and land tours, but now consumers expect more from travel agents. Consumers expect travel agents to be more than just a sales person but a travel expert, someone who is able to provide valuable information. To

capture the right target audiences, travel agencies need to understand what consumers look for in travel agency. According to Hui and Wan (2006) finding, their study suggested that the following factors were listed as the top important attributes for Singaporeans:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Value for money | 6. Destinations offered |
| 2. Agency reputation | 7. Tour accommodation |
| 3. Attitude of staff | 8. Understanding of customer |
| 4. Efficiency of staff | 9. Staff's knowledge |
| 5. Provision of prompt service | 10. Customers' past experience |

Researchers noted that 90.2% of the respondents were Chinese, 40.8% of the respondents were between the age of 22 and 30, and 31.5% of the respondents earned a monthly income between \$2,000 and \$2,999. The research showed that customers placed “value for money” as the most important attribute. In the current economic situation, consumers are even more price-sensitive leaving travel agencies to face with price competition.

Discussion

Introduction

This section will present two interviews. The first interview was with a travel agent and the second was an interview with a trade association, followed by a review of the findings from a survey conducted by MasterCard Index of travel. Comments on the consumers' buying behavior, trends, and recommendations of the findings will be discussed later.

National Association of Travel Agents in Singapore (NATAS)

A personal interview was conducted with Mr. Robert Khoo, the current Chief Executive Officer of NATAS. The interview took place on October 28, 2009 and it covered the following topics:

- (1) Customers' perception of value
- (2) The impact of the Internet on local travel agencies
- (3) How travel agents respond to technology development

The National Association of Travel Agents Singapore (NATAS) is a national body, and its objective is to represent all travel agents licensed by the Singapore Tourism Board (STB). NATAS was established in 1979, and the number of NATAS members had increased from 82 to 350 as of October 2009 (R. Khoo, personal communication, October 28, 2009). NATAS works closely with airlines, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB), and other affiliated bodies to promote both inbound and outbound tourism (NATAS, 2009). The mega travel fair is held biannually in order to draw in more travelers; once in February and again in August.

During the interview, R. Khoo (personal communication, October 28, 2009) presented the number of visitors that came to the fair was at 62,000. Although the number of visitors was three thousand lesser than in 2008 when compared to 2009, NATAS reported the fair had

generated closed to S\$ 57 million worth of vacation packages over the three-day fair. According to R. Khoo (personal communication, October 28, 2009) of NATAS, this had not only been a 14% increase, but also set a higher record for Singapore. This has exceeded the expectations of many travel agencies. In a newspaper report, it was accounted that on the first day of the August 2009 travel fair, a line had formed outside the door three hours prior to the opening time (Wee, 2009). In another newspaper article, a couple was reported to have camped outside since 2 A.M. the night before; solely because they did not want to miss out on the good deals (Jaganathan, 2009). Chen (2009) reported that “Singaporeans are keen to snap up the ‘good’ bargain and were even paying in full payments upfront.” The responses from the visitors were of no surprise to the exhibitors; it is hard to say “no” to the many irresistible discounts. Quoted from Chen’s (2009) newspaper article, “CTC holidays reported to have achieve an increase of 35% in sales revenue compared to last year” and “Chan Brothers ranked a sales record of S\$13 million within three days”.

The NATAS travel fair collects a S\$ 3 entrance fee. According to R. Khoo (personal communication, October 28, 2009) - the CEO of NATAS, the S\$ 3 entry fee is a small price to pay for the jammed- packed performance for these vacation seekers other than the discount values it brings for the vacation packages. In a press release from NATAS (Lim, 2009), they had announced this year’s event was a little different as compared to the previous year. The National Tourist Organizations (NTO) arranged for various special entertainment performances. Visitors had the opportunity to watch various traditional dance performances from Thailand, Taiwan, and Japan. In addition, singer-celebrity from Taiwan Ms Jolin Tsai was also present to light up the stage. It was a rare opportunity for visitors to enjoy those performances all within a day’s program, and not to mention, at a very low price.

Customers' perception of value.

R. Khoo (personal communication, October 28, 2009) explained: Travelers have become more cautious since the recent outbreak of Influenza A (H1N1), and worldwide economic crisis. Singaporeans are not excluded from this natural reaction. The travel industry suffered because travelers either cancelled their travel plans to avoid unnecessary flying, or they shrunk their travel budget. This is evident from the poor sales for mid-year holiday (from June to August). However, the sales made from the August 2009 travel fair proved that travelers are still prepared and ready to make their year-end travel. Despite the drop in number of visitors to 2009 travel fairs, the sales revenue for 2009 broke last year's record. The 2009 travel fair generated \$57 million worth of holiday packages while 2008's travel fair generated \$50 millions. Many visitors came to the NATAS travel fair to snap up attractive deals at the last minute because it is something they anticipated to catch – good deals. And if they don't have good deals, maybe they can skip a vacation this year because times are tough.

Singaporeans have the tendency to go for the "Offers" as many are very price-sensitive. But sometimes, being price sensitivity has caused a lot of Singaporeans to short-change themselves. The purchase of a travel package is one decision that is very subjective, but more often than not, travelers evaluate the package based on its price instead of its quality. Many Singaporeans fail to recognize that travel agents can easily manipulate the price by compromising the quality of the package. For instance, if a consumer's budget is S\$1,000 instead of S\$2,000, the travel agent can still satisfy the consumer by changing to a lower quality hotel accommodations, food arrangements, and even cheaper but shortened land tours.

The impact of the Internet on local travel agencies.

R. Khoo (personal communication, October 28, 2009) commented that nowadays Singaporeans are very Internet savvy and extremely well-informed. The advantage of the Internet is that travelers can complete their booking at any time even if it is in the middle of night. The convenience of online booking is undeniable and thus it becomes a disadvantage for travel agencies. The Internet has taken away about 20% - 25% of business versus 5% in the past. The impact of the Internet on travel agencies is growing and it is inevitable. Despite the growth of online booking, the number of travel agencies in Singapore has also continued to grow; from 350 travel agencies to about 900 travel agencies in Singapore. The disadvantage is that travel agents are simply middle-men, who do not own any products but buy from suppliers. It is easier for product suppliers to market online because they keep their own inventory and pricing. From the past five to ten years, R. Khoo (personal communication, October 28, 2009) made the observation that simple travel arrangements have been successfully made over the Internet.

R. Khoo (personal communication, October 28, 2009) spontaneously shared the American society of travel agents (ASTA) slogan “Without a travel agent, you are on your own”. There will still be a demand for travel agents because there are services which cannot be provided through the online booking site. It is due to the additional services which travel agencies provide that make the difference to an informed customer. The following are some of the services which travel agencies provide to their customers:

1. Professional travel advise
2. Experienced travel agents (which can be an invaluable for travelers who have never been to the countries they are about to travel).

3. Preparation of all necessary travel documents (for example: travelers are less likely to notice a passport that is about to become overdue but travel agents would. Also, the types of visas that is required for the different types of passports).
4. Human interface: When consumers book through travel agents, they can get assistants direct from the travel agents. But if consumers book through the Internet, there is no one for them to turn to when he is in trouble during his booking or even during the actual vacation.

Other than the convenience travel agents provide to their customers, they can sometime offer better price and packages too from bulk purchasing or bulk offering.

How travel agents respond to technology development?

R. Khoo (personal communication, October 28, 2009) explained that the threat of technology's fast development is unavoidable, and travel agencies have to deal with it. Travel agents are cognizant of the technology advances but they are adapting and adjusting to these advances and trying to stay resilient. A lot of travel agencies tried to sell their products online, but they have been less successful. After all, travel agents are middle men, not product suppliers. Product suppliers keep their own inventory, and are able to allocate the number of seats for online booking of travel packages. It is a different scenario for travel agents, since to sell such products online; they will have to buy these products from suppliers first before putting them online to sell.

As a trade association, it is NATAS' job to help travel agencies to stay resilient to the supply chain. The Internet has definitely made an impact on the travel industry; however, a majority of airline tickets are still sold through travel agents. In the past about 85% of the airline tickets are sold through travel agents but today it has probably dropped to about 60-70% only.

Travel agents now have to stay resilient by keeping up with the quality of service provided to the consumers. Additionally, they must make an extra effort to be constantly aware of changes in the consumers' traveling pattern; so that these travel agencies can alter travel packages to become more attractive to entice travelers.

Personal communication with Mr. Royston Ang (Representative of Uniquely S2T)

To have a better understanding of the travel agent's operation, Uniquely S2T was interviewed. The personal communication points out the services which Uniquely S2T provides to their consumers.

What are the services Uniquely S2T provide to their consumers?

R. Ang (personal communication, November 24, 2009) stated that to differentiate themselves from other travel agents, Uniquely S2T is one of the few travel agents who offer one-stop service. Uniquely S2T offers a wide range of services such as travel insurance, visa application, hotel, vouchers, transfer services to and from airport, and car rental service. Most travel agents offer advice on the visa requirement, and for a minimum fee, they would help the traveler to apply for the visa. However, not all travel agencies offer car rental service and transfer services to and from the airport. In addition, Uniquely S2T also offers 24 hours customer service, and value-for-money packages.

Uniquely S2T has also adopted the Internet as their marketing tool. On their website, travelers can view Uniquely S2T latest travel package, hotel promotions, and air fare promotion. In terms of the respond from the public, R. Ang (personal communication, November 24, 2009) stated that the travel agent generate more sales revenue from travel fair, followed by the Internet and lastly the sales office.

MasterCard Index Travel: Asian lifestyle survey

MasterCard conducts the Asian Lifestyle survey twice a year in 13 countries. The 2008 Asian Lifestyle survey focuses on the middle class of countries like Australia, New Zealand, China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Japan, Vietnam, Korea, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia. The findings of the surveys provide a good sample to describe Singaporeans' travel arrangement preference. Specifically for this paper, we will only be examining the results of Singapore survey: Index of travel.

For the 2007 and 2008 survey, MasterCard respectively had 805 and 810 respondents to participate. To have better understanding, Figure 4 to 8 will be used to compare the result from 2007 and 2008. In Figure 4, it studies how respondents' normally travel; whether with friends, family members or alone. In 2008, 42% of the respondents travel with friends, 37% with family, and 21% travel alone which is the least popular. There is not vast difference between 2007 and 2008. Therefore, it showed that most Singaporeans prefer to travel with friends followed by family, and the least is to travel alone.

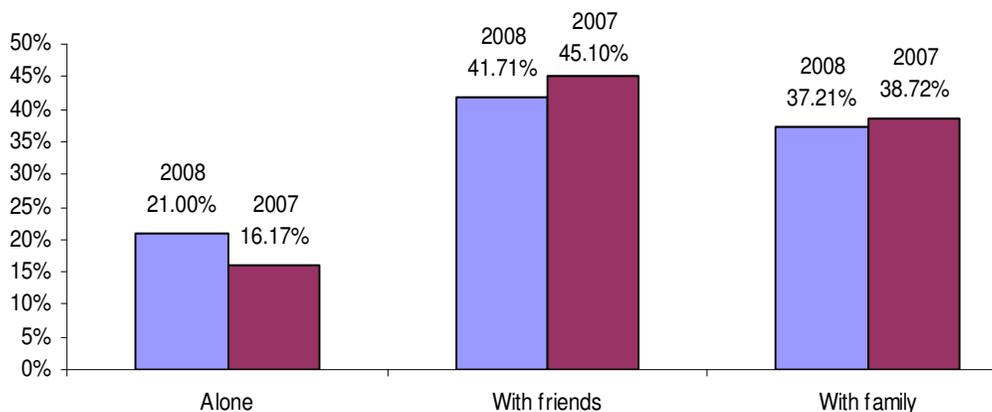


Figure 4. How do consumers normally travel?

Note. From MasterCard worldwide index of travel, H1 2008 and H2 2008.

Prior to deciding the travel destination, the surveys indicated the top two popular sources for collecting information is through either the Internet or travel agent (as show in Figure 5). The popularity of using the Internet and travel agent are rather competitive, as the difference is merely by minor percentage of 1% for 2008. In comparison with the result from 2007, although the Internet percentage remains unchanged, there has been an increase usage of travel agent by 2%. In addition, the statistics also showed that travel promotions play an increasing influence towards travelers' source for information.

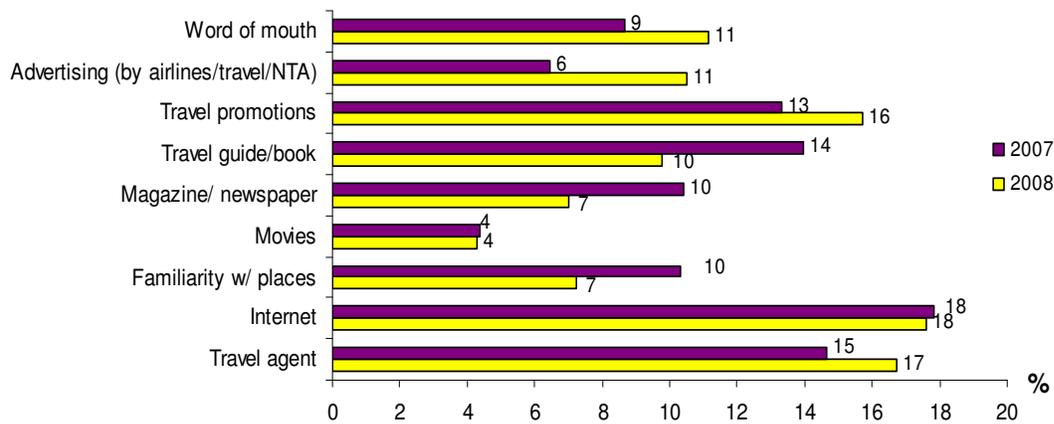


Figure 5. Key source of information used by travelers

Note. From MasterCard worldwide index of travel, H1 2007, H2 2007, H1 2008 and H2 2008.

According to the result of 2008, majorities (61.5%) of respondents normally travel on their own, and 38.35% of the respondents normally travel in a tour group (as shown in Figure 6). In comparison with 2007, the result did not indicate any vast changes in preference. This means that most Singaporean travelers prefer to travel on their own rather than in a group.

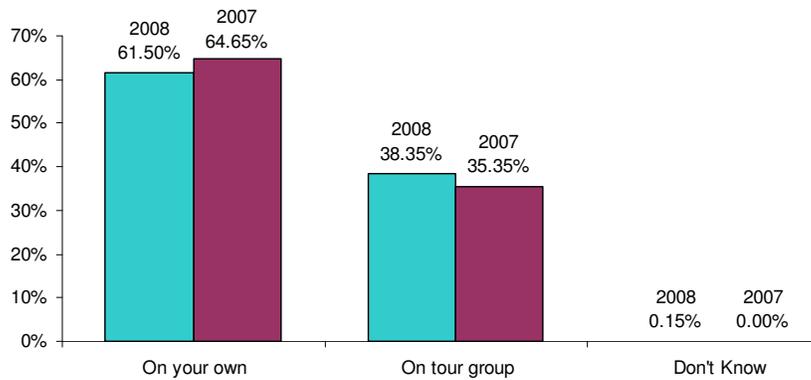


Figure 6. Travel on your own or with tour group?

Note. Source: From MasterCard worldwide index of travel, H1 2007, H2 2007, H1 2008 and H2 2008.

In terms of the air ticket booking channels, the preference for 2007 and 2008 had some changes. The preference to book through travel agent had dropped by 15%, which result an increase for through the Internet and office of an airline. The overall for 2008, the least popular channel is to book through the airline website (19.9%), 26.55% book through the internet, and the most popular source (53.55%) is to book through travel agent (as shown in Figure 7).

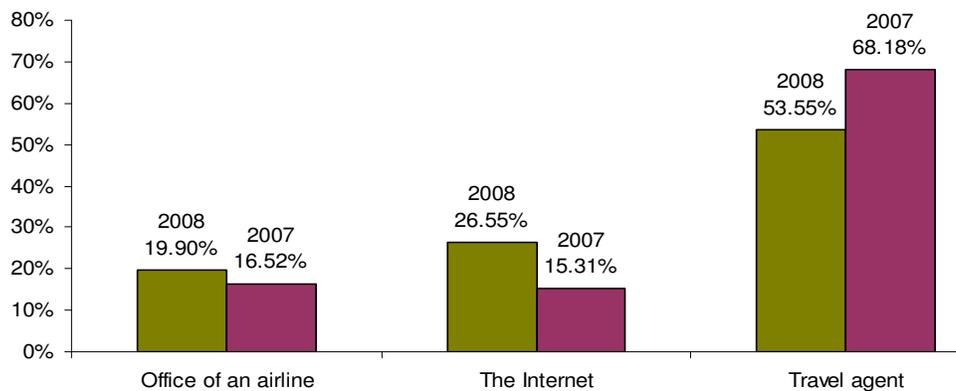


Figure 7. Air ticket: Book through which source?

Note. Source: From MasterCard worldwide index of travel, H1 2007, H2 2007, H1 2008 and H2 2008.

The booking channel for hotel accommodation reflects slight changes as well. Booking hotel accommodation through travel agent had dropped by 9%, and an increase of Internet booking by 16.5%. As shown in Figure 8, 2008 survey indicated that 24.66% through sales office of hotel, 31.97% through the Internet, and 43.23% through travel agents.

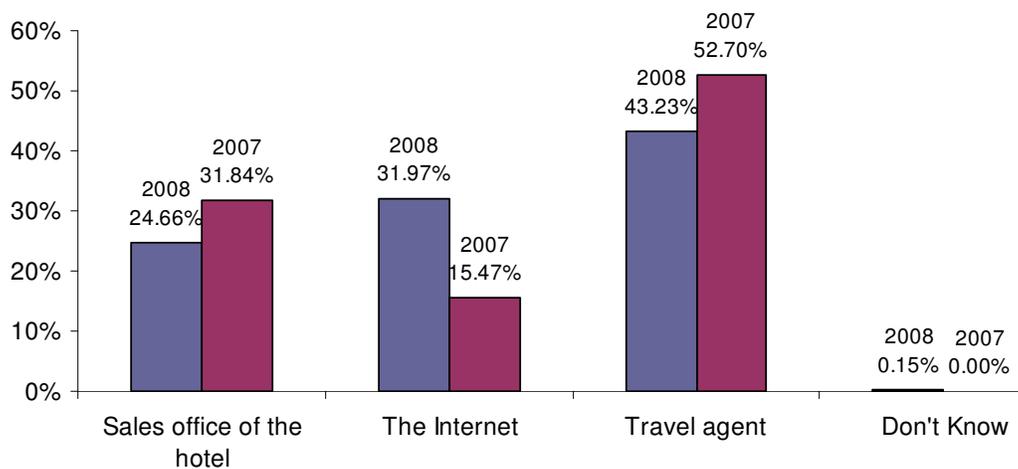


Figure 8. Hotel accommodation: Book through which source?

Note. Source: From MasterCard worldwide index of travel, H1 2007, H2 2007, H1 2008 and H2 2008.

Conclusion

In Singapore, the number of Internet users has been growing rapidly, and so has the number of e-shoppers. For travelers, e-commerce allows them to communicate directly with suppliers, search for information, and make reservations at any time and place. Travel agents worry that the accessibility of online travel web sites may eventually cause travelers to bypass travel agencies altogether (Law, Leung, & Wong, 2004). In the 2008 survey conducted by Infocomm development authority of Singapore, 98% of the respondents had surfed on the Internet but only 36% of respondents had reported to have actually made online purchases. Of those who made online purchases, only 38% bought travel products online. The most cited reason for not shopping online was that most respondents (31%) preferred to deal personally

with a service provider. As cited by 29% of the respondents, another common reason was the lack of interest in online shopping.

The results from MasterCard worldwide index of travel survey has (as shown in Figure 4-8) implied numerous important key points for Singaporeans' preference for travel arrangement.

Singaporeans prefer to travel with friends or family rather than traveling alone. Second, Singaporeans are likely to source information through the Internet or travel agents more so than any other methods. Advertisement and travel promotions are the other methods that do have some influence over travelers' choice of travel destinations. Although, 18% of respondents indicated that they use the Internet as a source for information, but 17% percentage of respondents used the travel agent as a source of information. A slight difference of 1% showed that there was no vast preference of the Internet over travel agencies. Another important finding was that a high percentage of respondents (53.55%) actually made their air ticket reservations through a travel agent, while only 26.55% made their air ticket reservations through the Internet. A higher percentage (43.23%) of the respondents made hotel reservations through a travel agent and 31.97% of the respondents made hotel reservation through the Internet. Despite the increasing number of e-shoppers, it seems as though the presence of the Internet has not caused a massive loss of customers for travel agencies.

The culture in Singapore has developed various effects that influence the buying behavior of Singaporeans. Singaporeans' love for shopping and looking for bargains are two factors that stood out as being extremely unique. The study conducted by Sim and Koi (2002) implies that e-commerce has not changed the e-shoppers' accustomed shopping methods. A majority of respondents from Sim and Koi (2002) study indicated that shopping is more than a simple buying process. During travel fair, travel agencies use phrases such as "Hot deals" or "Cheap

flights” to attract consumers’ attention. A local newspaper printed “Tour prices are cut by up to 60% at this year’s Natas fair” as the article’ heading to get the attention of readers (Tan, 2009). These headings are intended for consumers’ temptation for good bargains. As quoted from the visitors whom Tan (2009) had interviewed, most visitors were at the travel fair to “To score a good deal for their honeymoon in April”, “To find a 10-day Europe package to fit their \$4,000 budget”, “To look out for holiday deals to China, Vietnam or Taiwan, as he is planning a trip for about 12 of his family members and friends in April” and “To gather the best deals and report back to our friends”. All these point towards the fact that Singaporeans are more keen to look out for great deals that are value for money.

Overall, this paper presents the important finding that travel agencies and online reservation service will eventually remain equally important in the tourism industry. Like what R. Khoo (personal communication, October 28, 2009) from NATAS had commented, “Online travel sales records may keep rising, but travelers will still rely on travel agents for the human interface and expertise.” Hence, travel agents should be aware of fast-changing distribution environment, and stay positive towards it. It is important for travel agents to be prepared for major changes in the industry. Rather than being simply a booking agency, travel agencies should constantly provide customers with value for money packages, improve the attitude and efficiency of their staff, and advance staff’s knowledge through training (Hui & Wan, 2006); as these are the important attributes which Singaporeans look for in a good travel agency.

Recommendation

The Internet is an important competitor of travel agencies, because it also pushes the travel industry to improve the travel services and offer better product through healthy competition. Travel agencies may face many challenges in competing against what online

reservation system can provide to travelers. Nevertheless, travel agents should not view the Internet or e-commerce as a threat. Instead, the Internet needs to be viewed as an opportunity to provide additional value added services that in the past it could have been attained. Allow travelers to communicate with travel agents via electronic mail, or publication of promotional travel packages online for convenient viewing are some of the services that could not be achieved prior to the existence of the Internet.

As mentioned by R. Khoo (personal communication, October 28, 2009), the reasons why travelers turn to travel agents for booking are because professional expert guidance, experienced agents, preparation of travel documents and most importantly human interaction. Therefore, it is essential for travel agencies to recognize their strength and continue develop on those service aspects.

To gain a competitive edge over the Internet, travel agencies should provide better customer services, and continue to raise the service standards offering in Singapore. In this aspect, NATAS holds an important role in cultivating the travel industry. NATAS should conduct seminars and workshops for travel agencies. By doing so, it could encourage travel agencies to groom their staff to better serve the customers.

In addition, NATAS should continue organizing travel fair, because such events will urge consumers to bring along their family or friends to participate. When collectivist consumers attend promotion event, it engage consumers to make impulse purchases. Even though it may be impulse purchase, consumers will still be satisfied with the purchases. As such, it is to the retail travel agents advantages to organize events and promotions which consumers cannot resist.

In the near future, the use of Internet for shopping may increase or improvement with the development in technology, future research can be conducted in this aspect. The changes in technology may inversely change Singaporeans' preference in travel arrangement.

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