

Travel Guidebooks Must Inform

The most important purpose of a travel guidebook, according to the SHTM's Dr Simon Wong and Gladys Liu, is to highlight functional information such as attractions, food and new experiences. In a recent study the researchers show that independent travellers in particular refer to guidebooks to find information that will help them plan their itineraries and travel more efficiently. The quality of the information is also important, and must be "accurate, concise, up-to-date and objective". These findings will help to inform publishers of the features that travellers find most useful when purchasing a guidebook.

Role of Guidebooks

Because travel often involves visiting unknown destinations, travellers need to use guidebooks to help them make choices about their destinations and to plan their trips. Guidebooks provide descriptions of the destination and places of interest, details of accommodation, restaurants and activities, and factual information on the climate, currency and customs. In short they shape travellers' expectations.

Guidebooks can also be used as reference sources during trips. While those travellers who book comprehensive package tours may not need to make further decisions once they have chosen their destination, the researchers observe that for independent travellers, "an ongoing process of travel decision making may be required".

Guidebook Content

However, knowing which guidebook to choose is not always straightforward. The researchers explain that "there are hundreds if not thousands of travel guidebooks on the market". Amongst these are many that focus on different aspects of the same destination. There is a broad division between those guidebooks that focus on the destination and those that develop a theme, which heavily influences the content. Some provide information on a particular country's food, accommodation and transportation, whereas others focus on specific activities or facilities such as diving and spas.

The researchers thus set out to identify what travellers need from guidebooks, including differences among different groups of travellers, and to make recommendations to

publishers about how they can tailor information to travellers' different requirements.

A Survey of Hong Kong Residents

The researchers conducted a two-part study to examine the use of guidebooks among Hong Kong residents. First, 15 people who had recently travelled by air for leisure purposes were interviewed about their use of guidebooks before and during their trips. The information thus generated helped to shape a questionnaire with which the researchers surveyed 402 Hong Kong residents who were planning leisure travel in the next 12 months. The respondents were asked about their reasons for using a guidebook and elements of their travel plans such as their intended destination and length of trip.

A majority of the respondents were female (56.5%) and most were aged between 18 and 35 (68.7%). Over half were university educated (59.7%), but the largest single group earned incomes of less than HK\$5,000 per month (31.1%). A majority of the trips were to be to Japan, Taiwan or mainland China (59.2%) and most of the respondents intended taking either an all-inclusive package tour or a basic package tour (68.2%). A majority planned to travel with friends (59.6%) and almost all of the respondents indicated that they would travel without bringing children (90.7%).

Traveller Needs

In analysing the survey results, the researchers identified a range of needs that these travellers indicated they would have when using guidebooks. The respondents noted that "functional needs" or the "immediate and direct utilitarian necessities that must be fulfilled if the trip is to proceed successfully" were the most significant. "Itinerary improvement needs" or the necessity of acquiring "extra information for improving the trip", were the second most important. Ranked third were "quality information needs", referring to whether the information is accurate, objective and up-to-date.

One of the less important needs was "travel partners' needs" – planning a trip according to the specific needs of travelling companions such as the elderly, children or the disabled. The least important set of needs was "sign

needs”, such as advising others on vacation matters or answering other people’s questions.

Traveller Characteristics and the Importance of Needs

The importance of some of the needs varied according to participants’ age, education level and income level. For instance, those aged between 26 and 45 were less concerned about aesthetic needs – the use of pictures to visualise a destination. The researchers suggest that this group is more concerned that “time is money” than with the imagination; they tend to have higher incomes and travel to escape from their busy lives and seek new experiences.

Differences also emerged between respondents in terms of their “destination, mode of travel, length of trip, number of prior visits to the destination, travel companions and number of children. For example, those who intended to stay longer at their destination tended to place more importance on their itinerary improvement needs. The researchers suggest that “the more time available at the destination, the more flexible and customised the itinerary can become”.

Those respondents with children focused more on special services and facilities and sought information about theme parks, zoos and aquariums. The older respondents tended to be more concerned about their travel partners’ needs than were younger respondents because, according to the researchers, “older people usually travel with their children or their spouse who may have special needs”.

Recommendations for Publishers

In light of these findings, the researchers make a number of practical recommendations for guidebook publishers. They suggest that the focus should be on providing practical information that can be continuously updated. For instance, users would like information on the opening hours and entrance fees of attractions and how to get there. Information on new experiences would also attract those with higher incomes, who tend to plan more personalised and innovative trips.

As aesthetic and hedonic needs are important to Hong Kong travellers, particular attention should be paid to the content of communications, which might include “word selection, use of visuals and writing style”. Publishers should also remain independent, urge the researchers,

because guidebooks that are produced in collaboration with travel organisations may be seen as untrustworthy and less credible.

Both Practical Information and Inspiration

Overall, the researchers suggest that travellers look to guidebooks to find functional information on a destination. However, differences in the priority given to different needs may vary. Apart from practical information, guidebooks can provide comprehensive information that offers “an insight into prospective experiences” and thus have the “capacity to inspire the traveller”.

Points to Note

- Travel guidebooks are usually the first source of information for travellers.
- Practical information on the destination is the most important factor.
- Travellers’ needs vary according to their demographic and travel characteristics.
- Information needs to be perceived as credible, independent and up-to-date.

Wong, Chak Keung Simon and Liu, Fung Ching Gladys. (2011). “A study of pre-trip use of travel guidebooks by leisure travellers”. *Tourism Management*, 32(3), pp. 616-628.