

Press Release

27 November 2015

PolyU Study Finds Information Given Critical to Selling Travel through Television

The successful sale of travel products on TV shopping channels benefits from the emotional connection established with and depth of information presented to the viewer, according to Professor Brian King of the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and co-authors in a recently published article. Drawing on the concepts of “information transportation” and “information richness”, the researchers show that viewers presented with the right types of information are likely to perceive purchasing a travel product on TV as less risky than they otherwise would have, and thus be more likely to actually purchase the product. Their findings, the researchers argue, provide “a starting point to understand consumers’ purchase intentions for travel products in non-store retailing”.

Consumers, note the researchers, are increasingly turning to TV shopping because it offers easy access and the opportunity to virtually inspect products before buying, eliminating what they describe as the “sight-unseen barrier”. Cable TV in Taiwan, for instance, has a more than 80% market penetration rate and offers five dedicated shopping channels. Around 20% of Taiwanese have made purchases through such channels, with the number of buyers constantly increasing over the past few years.

Travel products are among the top selling items on TV channels, the researchers write, and the medium offers sellers a “new sales paradigm for travel marketing and distribution”, with the potential to reach a wide audience. Even with the increase in Internet sales, many shoppers prefer TV commerce because they tend to be “more familiar with the medium of TV” and find it more user-friendly. In fact, the researchers liken it to “perusing a glossy and colourful travel magazine” and suggest that the living room can be “understood as a point of sale”.

Nevertheless, they note that because travel products are inherently experience-based, they are rather “intangible” and their “quality cannot be fully evaluated until the time of consumption”. In other words, it is impossible to know whether a tour will meet expectations until it has been experienced, which makes the purchase seem more risky than buying something more tangible that can be more easily evaluated.

It might be possible, the researchers propose, to increase the “sense of tangibility” of such products by providing information on them that “transports” customers to another, though no less realistic, world. Referring to this experience as “information transportation”, they use the term to describe the state in which a viewer becomes so immersed in the narrative being presented to them that they may become distant from the “real world” and equate what they are viewing with direct experience.

The researchers also explain the concept of “information richness” in communication. As TV shoppers do not have an opportunity to inspect or evaluate the product, they

must rely on the richness of the information supplied by the TV presenter. The presenter can “talk” to the viewer directly, and may provide not only in-depth information about the product but also a demonstration or endorsement of it. Providing rich information in this way is likely to reduce the perception of risk in buying the product and thus encourage purchases.

The researchers thus set out to investigate how the transmission of information and the richness of its content affect “the risks associated with the consumption of travel products via TV”. They also wanted to consider how viewers’ purchasing intentions are influenced by these risks.

Given the significance of TV shopping in Taiwan, travellers in the departure area of Taoyuan International Airport in Taipei were selected to watch a video about a tour package from a TV shopping channel. They then completed a questionnaire that measured their information transportation, the video’s information richness and the perceived riskiness of buying travel products via TV. Finally, the travellers were asked whether they would be likely to purchase the product now that they had watched the video, and whether they would recommend it to others.

The 252 travellers who took part included family members, couples and tourist groups, with an almost equal number of men and women. The highest proportion of respondents was in the 41-50 year-old age group, followed by 21-30, then 31-40 and 51-plus. More than 60% were married and more than 75% had university undergraduate degrees or higher. Overall, 28.5% had purchased at least one travel-related product through a TV channel in the past.

As they expected, the researchers found that the viewers who perceived the product to be less risky were more likely to want to purchase it. Furthermore, those who experienced a greater sense of transportation while watching the travel video rated the tour as a less risky purchase. The researchers propose that information transportation made the “narrative events resemble personal experiences” and allowed the viewers to “visualise and monitor” the product, which helped to make it more tangible. At the same time, the “strong emotions associated with the characters” portrayed in the narrative also reduced the sense of risk.

Against the researchers’ expectations, the information richness of the video did not seem to affect the viewers’ perceptions of risk, possibly because of the “intangibility of travel”. Nevertheless, they did find “that purchasing intentions are enhanced by offering rich information on TV travel shopping”. Such information, they argue, provides viewers with opportunities for instant feedback, uses multiple cues and natural language and conveys feelings, which helps them to evaluate the product.

Overall, then, the intention to purchase a travel product through TV depends on both the richness of the information provided and the level of risk associated with the product, which in turn is influenced by the extent to which viewers can imagine themselves in the travel scenario and feel emotionally connected to it.

Tourism marketers stand to benefit from several important implications of this study. For instance, as vivid information transportation reduces the perceived risk of TV shopping, marketing images should feature consumers in the travel scene, because this

helps viewers to imagine themselves in the scenario and provides an emotional connection with the destination. Establishing such a connection, argue the researchers, will reduce the “perceptions of psychological and quality-related risks”, which in turn will increase the intention to purchase the product.

As the richness of the information also increases the intention to purchase, the researchers suggest that marketers should “communicate in rich and varied language”, “provide timely feedback” and “tailor interactions” to the audience. When communicating with customers, service providers should “demonstrate expertise and sufficient competence”, and TV hosts should be “well trained and communicate effectively” to ensure consumers receive rich information.

As the researchers note, the planning and consumption of travel has been “fundamentally reshaped” by the development of media, which play an increasingly important role as “purveyors of travel information, advertising, destination images and promotions”. With the “increasingly blurred” relationship between TV and personal computers, they suggest that it may now be time to examine the dissemination of tourism information through “other Internet media channels, such as YouTube, Facebook and Web blogs”.

Hu, Hsin-Hui Sunny, Chen, Po-Tsang and King, Brian. (2014). Television as a Travel Purchasing Medium: Transporting Rich Information and its Impact. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 20(4), 295-307.

Press contact : Ms Pauline Ngan, Senior Marketing Manager
School of Hotel and Tourism Management

Telephone : (852) 3400 2634

E-mail : pauline.ngan@polyu.edu.hk

Website : www.polyu.edu.hk/htm