

2004

Backpackers, Byron and brand: the power of WOM

Janet Hanlan
Southern Cross University

Stephen J. Kelly
Southern Cross University, School of Business

Publication details

Hanlan, JJ & Kelly, SJ 2004, 'Backpackers, Byron and brand: the power of WOM', in J Wiley & P Thirkell (eds), *Marketing accountabilities and responsibilities: proceedings of the Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference (ANZMAC)*, Wellington, New Zealand, 29 November - 1 December, School of Marketing and International Business, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand, ISBN: 0475122143.

© Janet Hanlan & Stephen J Kelly

Backpackers, Byron and Brand: The Power of WOM

Janet Hanlan & Dr Stephen Kelly
Southern Cross University

Abstract

Tourist destination brand image is a major influencing factor in traveler destination choice. This exploratory research into the information sources from which destination brand image evolves, aims to provide insights which may improve destination marketing communication strategies. In-depth interviews with 21 international backpackers on Australia's northern New South Wales coast indicate that mainstream media played little or no part in the formation of respondents' image of the coastal destination of Byron Bay. Research findings show word-of-mouth (WOM) and autonomous independent information sources were the key mediums through which respondents formed their image of this iconic Australian tourist destination. Findings suggest that destination marketing organisations (DMO) can and should go beyond traditional mainstream media to communicate their brand message. Additionally, findings suggest the need for DMO's to provide leadership within in the destination's tourism industry to improve service delivery and exceed the 'brand promise'.

Keywords: tourism destination, backpackers, image, information sources

Introduction and Literature Review

Past qualitative and empirical research has shown destination brand image plays a major role in leisure travel behaviour (Woodside and Lysonski, 1989; Chon, 1990; Hu and Ritchie, 1993; Milman and Pizam, 1995; Tapachai and Waryszak, 2000), with Moran, Pritchard and Piggott, (2002) stating that 'branding is perhaps the most powerful marketing weapon available to contemporary destination marketers confronted by increasing product parity, substitutability and competition'. Given that image plays such a crucial role in destination marketing, an understanding of the role of information sources in image creation will assist DMO's to improve their brand positioning and communication strategies (Gartner, 1993; Kim & Yoon, 2003).

Existing literature shows the development of destination image to be a multi-stage process, where travel consumers develop an initial image of a destination through exposure to information sources beyond the control of the DMO. Controlled marketing communication then aims to manipulate this image to increase destination appeal to the target audience (Gunn, 1972; Chon, 1987; Fayeke & Crompton, 1991; Gartner, 1993; Litvin & Ling, 2000). Additional research has also shown experience with a destination, through visitation, will lead to further evolution of the image creating a more complex representation of the destination (Fayeke & Crompton 1991).

Gartner (1993) supports the notion that different information sources impact on image development differently, providing an information source typology which outlines eight possible information sources from which destination image is drawn. Gartner (1993) identifies these sources as:

- Overt Induced 1 – traditional forms of advertising generated by the marketing entity
- Overt Induced 2 – information generated from sources with a vested interest in the marketing outcome, such as agents or intermediaries.
- Covert Induced 1 – information provided by a paid sponsor endorsed by a known identity or expert, with the aim of increasing the credibility of the advertising claim.
- Covert Induced 2 – information influenced by the marketing organisation which appears to the recipient to be an independent and unbiased source.
- Autonomous – genuinely independent information sources such as news reports and documentaries.
- Unsolicited Organic – word-of-mouth information generated by individuals who have either visited the destination or who claim an understanding of the destinations attributes.
- Solicited Organic – word-of-mouth information sought by the traveler from a credible source
- Organic - information gained from actual experience with the destination.

There has however, been limited research on the relative importance of those information sources as they relate to destination image formation in the Australian tourism context and within the international backpacker market. The aim of this research was to determine the sources from which international backpackers drew their image of the Australian coastal destination, Byron Bay, and the role these sources played in destination image formation. Specifically, the following research question was addressed: What are the key information sources that have contributed to formation of the brand image of Byron Bay within the UK and European segment of the international backpacker market?

The generalisability of these findings to other contexts was also considered.

Method

While Gartner's (1993) information source typology provides part of the theoretical framework from which the research ensued, the research problem remained exploratory in nature as the attributes of the Byron Bay brand and the contribution of information sources on destination brand image were unknown. This required a methodology capable of handling theory generation. Further, given the research deals with complex social issues involving reflective people, it was determined that unstructured in-depth interviews, following the convergent interviewing process described by Dick (1990), provided an appropriate exploratory qualitative method for investigation of the research problem. This technique, characterised by open-ended ethnographic interviews, is best used when we seek to '...understand the complex behaviour of members of society' (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 366).

The process of convergent interviewing adopted by this research required a minimum of two interviewers working independently but concurrently. The two interviewers compared data from each set of interviews, seeking convergence both within the interview and over the series of interviews. Convergence from interview to interview was achieved by discarding low priority information mentioned only once. Information mentioned more than once became the focus of following interviews. If the two interviewers agreed, probe questions were devised to test the

agreement. If in disagreement, probe questions sought an explanation. The process continued until no new data emerged (Dick, 1990).

The selected population was international backpackers from the UK and Europe, currently in Australia, who had either visited Byron Bay or intended to do so. It is noted that this segment is a dominant market segment in the Byron Bay tourism industry representing 43% of the international visitor market compared with a state average of 8% (Tourism NSW, 2001) and that the international backpacker segment is a significant tourism market. Respondents were screened to ensure a close fit between the demographic characteristics of the international backpacker population who visited New South Wales and the research sample. The demographic composition of the sample showed respondents to be: aged between 18 and 28 years, consistent with the statewide backpacker profile; a slight male gender skew, 62% of respondents compared with 52% statewide; country of origin was Britain 52%, Ireland 24%, Sweden 14% and Holland 10%, where Tourism NSW (2001) show the total backpacker population to be 32% British and 37% identified as 'other European'.

Research participants were recruited from several backpacker hostels on the north coast of New South Wales. Of a total of 32 backpackers asked to participate in the research, 21 valid respondents agreed to participate. Of the remaining 11 people approached, three declined to participate, five were not in the targeted population and three were excluded to keep a balance between the number of participants who had and had not visited Byron Bay.

In addition to in-depth interviews, informants were asked to complete a fieldwork questionnaire as a further means of data triangulation. Informants were provided with a list of 36 possible sources of destination information drawn from preliminary interviews with industry experts, organised under Gartner's (1993) classification schema. Informants were asked to rate the relative importance of each source in formulating their image of Byron Bay and to rate each source on a scale of one to five, with one signifying low importance and five signifying a high level of importance.

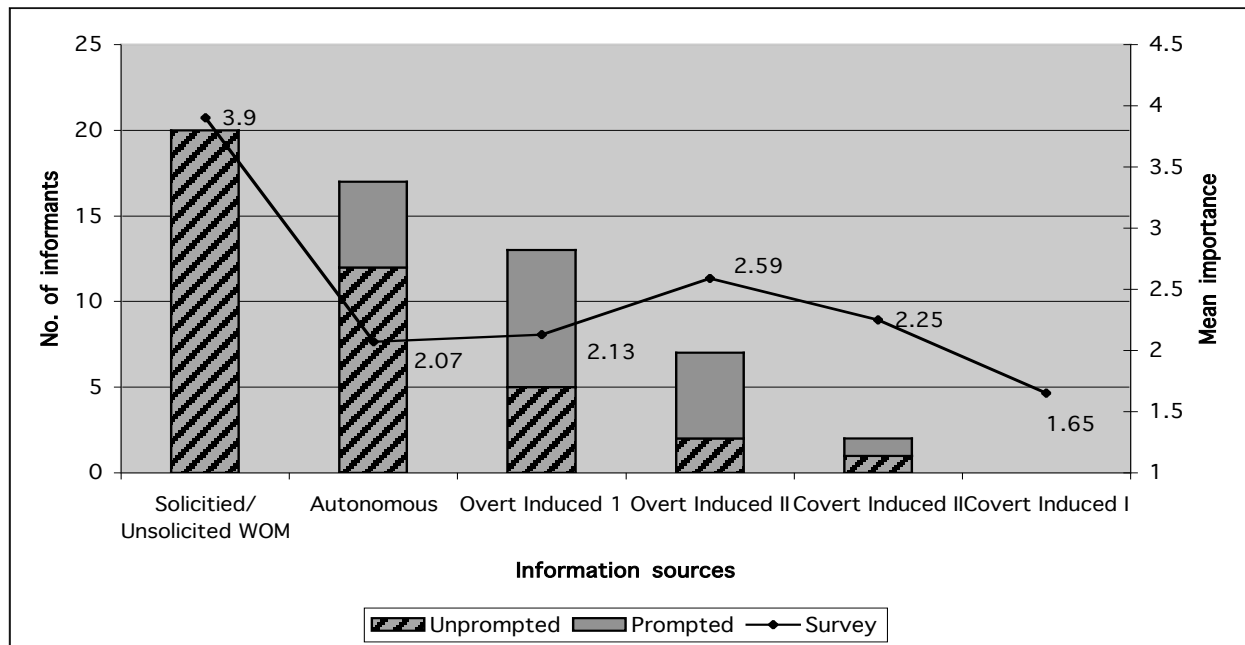
Results

Informant responses to open-ended and probe questions relating to the information sources they had encountered on Byron Bay, revealed word-of-mouth (WOM) to be the most influential image formation information source, with 95% of informants identifying this source without prompting. The next most frequently identified information source was brochures and magazines in hostels (67% of informants), followed by the Lonely Planet Guide to Australia (62% of informants). However, of these two sources, eleven informants (52%) mentioned the Lonely Planet Guide to Australia, as having an impact on their image of Byron Bay unprompted, while only five informants (24%) discussed brochures and magazines in hostels without prompting from the interviewer.

Further, agents and intermediaries influenced a sizable minority of informants (28%). Several informants (19%) had drawn images of Byron Bay from exposure to popular culture including information on the Byron Bay Blues Festival and through reading Bill Bryson's novel 'Down Under' and 10% of informants had seen travel programs on Byron Bay. Other travel guide books including AA Guide to Australia and the Rough Guide to Australia had been read by 14% of

informants, and 19% recalled asking the opinion of staff in hostels. Only a small number of informants had gained information through the internet (14%). These information sources, identified during the in-depth interviews were then mapped to Gartner’s information source typology and contrasted with the data generated from the fieldwork questionnaire. The results are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Destination Image Information Sources



Source: Backpacker interviews and fieldwork questionnaire

NB: The mean importance score has a range from 1 to 5 consistent with the fieldwork questionnaire options.

The columns in Figure 1 show the number of informants who identified each information source, both prompted and unprompted, as influencing their image of Byron Bay; this data is drawn from the interviews. The line graph shows the mean importance score assigned to each source from the fieldwork questionnaire. Figure 1 shows WOM remains the most influential information source identified by 20 of the 21 informants and receiving the highest importance rating (mean score 3.90). Autonomous information sources show a large disparity between the interview data (ranked as 2nd most influential) and the survey data (ranked as 5th most influential). This is due to the weighting given to the Lonely Planet guidebook as a major influence, which emerged from the interview process. However the other autonomous information sources in the survey were ranked as relatively unimportant and drag down the mean score, a result that indicates the value of the applied research methodology.

Overt induced I sources ranked 3rd most influential in the interviews and 4th in the survey. Again the influence of one element in this category, brochures and magazines in hostels, emerged as a strong influence through the interviews but the mean score in the survey ranked lower due to the low ranking assigned to the influence of main stream mass media. The influence of overt

induced II information sources was ranked 2nd in the survey and only 4th in the interviews. This is likely to be the result of a large number of intermediaries having had some influence on destination choice, however, the interviews revealed the role of agents and intermediaries to be more related to developing travel itineraries than enhancing destination image. So, while agents and intermediaries did appear to influence the travel decision process their input was more on the 'how' to get places rather than the 'what' to expect at a particular destination and 'where' to go. Covert induced II sources received a low importance ranking from the interview data (5th) but a considerably higher importance ranking in the survey (3rd). There is no obvious explanation for the disparity in this category, for while sources in this category received a mean ranking of 2.25, indicating it to be moderately important; only two informants could identify this source in the interview. Covert induced I sources received the lowest importance ranking through both sets of data.

Discussion and Conclusions

Research Question 1 sought to discover the information sources from which the image of the tourist destination Byron Bay, amongst UK and European backpackers in Australia, was generated. Results indicate this image has predominately been formed through WOM and autonomous, independent information sources, particularly the Lonely Planet Guide to Australia. The implications of these findings are of particular relevance to DMO, as they have little or no control over the image generated through these mediums. The image attributes communicated through such mediums are generated through the experience travelers and journalists have at the destination. These images are then disseminated throughout the market segment. Control of destination image is further diluted as DMO's typically have little or no control over travelers' experience with the destination, which tends to be comprised of service encounters with a range of small, disparate business operations.

Research findings do however suggest several strategies to assist DMO's in effective destination brand development. One avenue open to marketers who wish to develop a strong destination brand is to firstly clarify, within specific market segments, a small number of positive and meaningful image attributes generated through destination experience. These attributes then provide the dimensions on which a tourism destination brand can be positioned. Such a market positioning strategy is sustainable as it is reinforced by destination visitation and the image attributes are fed back into the communication mix.

Research findings also indicate an opportunity for DMO's to go beyond traditional mainstream media to communicate their brand message. Findings suggest tactics such as familiarisation tours for intermediaries, journalists and opinion leaders, designed to focus attention on desired destination image attributes, may offer cost effective alternatives. Additional, albeit controversial, tactics may also include radical new marketing strategies such as *whisper marketing* and its online incarnation *viral marketing*, where opinion leaders and trendsetters are enticed to infiltrate specific target markets generating positive messages to harness the extraordinary power of word-of-mouth advertising. Global youth oriented brands such as Nike and 7UP have successfully supplemented their mainstream media campaigns using these types of guerilla marketing tactics. Such tactics appear to be gaining wider acceptance, with an Australian advertising agency revealing they have unleashed their 'F2F (face to face) Army' on

unsuspecting consumers to promote a diverse range of products including prams, mobile phone services and banking products (Duff, 2003).

Additionally, while it is acknowledged that DMO's traditionally have had little control over the product mix or service delivery at a destination, research results support the notion that services marketing is inextricably linked to services management. If the destination experience does not live up to the destination 'promise' delivered through controlled marketing communication, WOM and autonomous information sources may dilute the brand message. DMO's themselves may need to be re-branded to become destination management organisations, providing direction and leadership to the tourism industry to encourage a focused approach to destination brand positioning and service delivery.

References

Chon, K., 1987, "An Assessment of Images of Korea As a Tourist Destination by American Tourists", *Hotel and Tourism Management Review*, Vol. 3, pp. 155-170.

Chon, K., 1990, "The Role of Destination Image in Tourism: A Review and Discussion," *The Tourist Review*, February, pp. 2-9.

Dick, B., 1990, *Convergent Interviewing*, Chapel Hill, Interchange.

Duff, E., 2003, 'Pssst... have you heard about the new way to advertise?', *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 12, p.36.

Eisenhardt, K. M., 1989, Building Theory from Case Study Research. *Academy of Management Review*, 14(4), pp. 532-550.

Fakeye, P. and Crompton, J., 1991, Image Differences between Prospective, First-Time and Repeat Visitors to the Lower Rio Grande Valley", *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 30, No.2, pp. 10-16.

Fontana, A. & Frey J. H., 1994, Interviewing: The Art of Science. In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln. Sage, Thousand Oaks, pp. 361-376.

Gartner, W., 1993, "Image Formation Process," *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, Vol. 2, No.2/3, pp. 191-215.

Gunn, C., 1972, "*Vacationscape: Designing Tourist Regions*," Austin:, Bureau of Business Research, University of Texas.

Hu, Y. and Ritchie, J., 1993, "Measuring Destination Attractiveness: A Contextual Approach", *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 32, pp. 25-34.

Kim, S. and Yoon, Y., 2003, "The Hierarchical Effects of Affective and Cognitive Components on Tourism Destination Image", *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, Vol. 14, No. 2.

Litvin, S. and Ling, S., 2000, "The destination attribute management model: an empirical application to Bintan, Indonesia", *Tourism Management*, Vol. 22, pp. 481-492.

Miles, M. B. & Huberman A. M., 1994, *Qualitative Data Analysis: a scorebook of new methods*. Sage Publications. Beverley Hills.

Milman, A. and Pizam, A., 1995, "The role of Awareness and Familiarity with a Destination: The Central Florida Case", *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 33, pp. 21-27.

Morgan, N., Pritchard, A. and Piggott, R., 2002, "New Zealand, 100% pure. The Creation of a Powerful Niche Destination Brand", *Journal of Brand Management*, Vol.9, pp. 335-354.

Tapachai, N and Waryszak, R., 2000, "An Examination of the Role of Beneficial Image in Tourist Destination Selection", *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 39, pp. 37-44.

Tourism New South Wales, 2001, *Regional Research Review*,
<http://corporate.tourism.nsw.gov.au/scripts/runisa.dll?CorporateLive.197094:2COLUMN:1331859960:pp=STATSRS,pc=STATSRPROF>

Woodside, A. and Lysonski, S., 1989, "A General Model of Traveler Destination Choice", *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 27, pp. 8-14.

Yin, R. K., 1989, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. Sage Publications. Beverley Hills.