



Testing discontinuous innovations in the tourism industry: The case of scenic airship services



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Presents a new methodology for examining consumer interest in discontinuous innovations in tourism.
- This methodology is shown to be robust using a case study of scenic airship services within the Queenstown tourism market.
- Provides a way to ameliorate some of the risks associated with starting tourism ventures.
- Demonstrates that innovative tourist offerings may generate significant consumer interest and areas for future growth.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 July 2017

Received in revised form

4 December 2017

Accepted 5 December 2017

Keywords:

Discontinuous innovation

Scenic tourism

Consumer interest

Product development

Scenic airship services

ABSTRACT

The tourism industry is widely recognised as a driver of economic growth around the world. Yet it has also been recognised that the tourism industry faces many issues regarding continued growth and development. Novel ideas are needed to ensure the future growth of the tourism industry. Discontinuous innovations are products that aim to solve existing needs in dramatically different and better ways. This study contributes to the tourism literature by developing a methodology for testing discontinuous innovations in the tourism industry. The new methodology has five phases: (1) qualitative exploration, (2) quantification, (3) product development, (4) evaluation, and (5) qualitative explanation. A case study operationalises this methodology within the context of scenic airship services. Significant consumer interest was shown for scenic airship services and a descriptive model of what drove this interest was created for the tourism market of Queenstown, New Zealand.

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1. Introduction

Tourism is an important driver of economic growth around the world (Lee & Chang, 2008; Tang & Tan, 2015). New tourist products are vital to ensuring the continued growth of the tourism industry and accordingly its economic impact. In particular, innovations can be a significant driver of growth in tourism (Hjalager, 2010), for example, in New Zealand (the location for this research) adventure tourism has been innovative and has also seen significant growth (e.g. see Cloke & Perkins, 1998). Unfortunately, the tourism literature provides little guidance on how to assess the viability or formulation of a completely new and radically different tourist product, known as a discontinuous innovation. This paper presents

a new methodology for such a purpose and applies it to a case study in Queenstown, New Zealand (a popular tourist destination). In particular, whilst many market research studies might combine focus groups/interviews with surveys in a two stage process, this study uses a five phase process that serves to ameliorate risk for capital intensive innovations. The case study provides a solid foundation for future research in examining consumer interest in novel and different tourist products, such as scenic airship services.

1.1. Premise for the case study

Scenic airship services provide an interesting and suitable example for this study as such services are potentially achievable as real businesses. In particular, airships have historically been used as a means of luxury passenger transport, and this use only ended as a result of the Hindenburg disaster in 1937. Also participants of this study should have enough working/basic knowledge about airships

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to allow them to envisage a scenic airship service. Although the concept of a discontinuous innovation is inherently novel, it is a reasonable assumption that such innovations will have features with which consumers are familiar but which are combined in ways which are novel; in this case the novelty is combining scenic tours (e.g. coach tours) with a novel use of a different mode of transport.

Airships are lighter than air (LTA) controllable aircraft. Overall operating costs are lower for LTA aircraft than fixed wing or rotary wing aircraft when worked out as a function of payload, hours and distance travelled (Recoskie, Fahim, Gueaieb, & Lanteigne, 2013). Pant (2010) also notes that airships allow for luxurious space, are flexible and safer when handling safety hazards such as bird strikes and minor hits into objects and are environmentally friendly due to their low noise and emission outputs. Airships, however, are much slower than other aircraft types (Hillsdon, 2012).

Regarding a tourist experience, it can be defined as “an individual’s subjective evaluation and undergoing of events related to his/her tourist activities which begins before, during and after the trip” (Tung & Ritchie, 2011, p. 1369). The key idea that is captured in the definition is that tourism experiences are not one-size-fits-all services and, depending on how the tourist experience is designed, marketed, delivered and followed up, only certain consumers will consider these experiences as memorable. For example, the characteristics of operational efficiency, luxurious cabin design, safety and slow speeds make airships unique from other commercial aircraft. Accordingly, it is not known how these unique characteristics might influence the memorability of tourist experiences. Note that airships have not been used for scenic tourism purposes in recent times and have seldom been used for passenger services since the Hindenburg Disaster of 1937 (Hillsdon, 2012). In absence of any service offering, there is a total absence of information relating to the market characteristics of scenic airship services. It is possible that the absence of any airship service offering is due to past misrepresentations about the safety of airships. It has been suggested that misattribution of cause for the Hindenburg Disaster has precluded the use of airships for passenger services because people have a phobia of hydrogen – which was initially assumed to be the cause of the disaster (Bain & van Vorst, 1999). There is no data to substantiate this claim, however, it seems reasonable at face value (e.g. there is a movie about the Hindenburg disaster). Notably, most modern airships use the inert and incombustible helium gas for lift (Bain & van Vorst, 1999). Helium, however, is significantly more expensive (Baughman, 2013), which suggests that airship safety would need to be included as a subject in the research design.

1.2. Location for the case study

Queenstown is a city and tourist centre in the South Island of New Zealand that is proximate to a number of scenic areas (Destination Queenstown, 2013). By 2012 figures, the Queenstown-Lakes tourism industry accounts for 34.1% of the region’s employment (5171 people) and 24.6% of the region’s GDP (\$NZ265.9 million) (Leung-Wai, 2013). Seasonality is a factor that affects the Queenstown tourism industry with international tourists peaking in December/January and July/August and domestic tourists peaking in January, July and April. In addition, operational difficulties exist with air travel in Queenstown due to mountainous terrain, changeable weather and a high density of air traffic (CAANZ, 2012). Despite these difficulties, Queenstown airspace is still used for a number of aviation activities including scheduled airline services, scenic flights, aerobatic flights, flight training, helicopter flights,

balloon flights, hang gliding, paragliding, gliding and parachutes. Considering the variety of existing aviation activities and the importance of tourism in Queenstown, it is a logical place for a case study on the use of airships for scenic tourism.

The key contribution of the study is to develop a methodology for researching discontinuous innovations using a case study methodology. As such, the research questions developed for the study are managerially oriented, and are developed as if scenic airship services were an actual business proposition. Reflecting this managerial approach, the study takes the core innovation of scenic airship services and commences with an examination of what features and facilities of the service would optimise consumer interest in the service. The ‘optimised’ service is then used to examine whether there is consumer interest in the scenic airship service. As such, the study commences with two research questions.

1. Is there consumer interest in scenic airship services within the Queenstown tourism market?
2. What kind of services and facilities would optimise consumer interest?

Although Question 1 is specific to the case, the research questions in this study are a means to examine whether the methodology used to conduct the research can be used as a useful managerial tool. In this respect, Question 1 can be generalised to ‘Is there consumer interest in [x] within the [y] market?’

This paper is organised as follows: Section 2 examines the relevant literature on consumer interest in tourism products and on new product development; Section 3 proposes a discontinuous tourism innovation methodology for examining consumer interest and demonstrates its use in the context of scenic airship services; Section 4 applies the data obtained from the methodology back to the research questions; Section 5 discusses the implications of the new methodology; and Section 6 provides the conclusion.

2. Literature review

2.1. Consumer interest in tourist products

In prior tourism research, ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors were used to explain what makes tourists travel (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1977). Push factors (e.g. culture, people, and landscape) are those that predispose a tourist to travel. Pull factors (e.g. amenities) are those that attract a tourist to a particular place/activity/resort and whose value is seen to reside in the object of travel. This conceptualisation of tourist motivation for travel in terms of push and pull factors is still used in tourism literature (Chen & Chen, 2015; Kim, Lee, & Klenosky, 2003; Prayag & Ryan, 2010). The push and pull factor model was developed in the psychological era of behaviourism. Accordingly, it treats motivational factors as objective and rational. Taking the cognitivist point-of-view, this study would argue that there are a number of subjective and irrational aspects of motivation that cannot be explained by this model alone. This argument was also used by Gnoth (1997) to justify enhancing the use of push and pull factors by separating motivation into two dimensions: motives and motivations. Motives are broad and generic and while implying a direction and target, do not necessarily specify one (Gnoth, 1997). Motivations are different in that they include a clear objective or target, usually based upon the individual’s objective situation (temporal, spatial and economic) and subjective situation (values and expectations). This enhancement of the push and pull factor model is given further credence by a study of McCabe (2000), which shows visitors to a national park in England had engaged in a

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