Decision making by specialist luxury travel agents

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We analyse decision processes of specialist travel agents in luxury wildlife tourism.
- Agents narrow down their choice by considering 5 groups of external factors sequentially.
- Agents use intuitive tacit expertise relying principally on their personal experience.
- Expectations are very high and agents act as powerful information brokers.
- To confirm their choice, agents project themselves into their clients' perspective.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

We report an ethnographic study of specialist travel agents in luxury wildlife tourism. Agents consider 30 factors in 5 groups, related to client, destination, attraction, operator and agent. They consider the groups in sequence rapidly and intuitively. They are driven by a powerful regard for the high expectations of wealthy clients, and a sense of responsibility to the clients, but they assume authority over the decision. They rely on personal experience with each particular place and tourism product, and sell only what they know. One of their skills is to project themselves into the client's perspective so as to imagine a trip in great detail. This process contrasts strongly with the explicit deterministic approach used by retail travel agents in high-volume lower-priced subsectors, where earnings are driven by commission and incentive structures. For high-end agents, establishing long-term relationships of mutual trust with individual clients and tour operators is paramount.

1. Introduction

The role of travel agents in the tourism industry is constantly changing, and continually contested. Travel agents are, and remain, a key component of the tourism industry (Baloglu & Mangaloglu, 2001; Chen & Chang, 2012; Chow, Lai, & Loi, 2015; Gustafson, 2012; Klenosky & Gitelson, 1998; Lovelock, 2008; McKercher, Packer, Yau, & Lam, 2003). As the technical logistics of travel purchases have changed, however, agents are no longer ubiquitous intermediaries in every transaction (Cheyne, Downes, & Legg, 2006; Del Chiappa, 2013; Hong, Yan, & Gu, 2013; Kracht & Wang, 2010; Roma, Zambuto, & Perrone, 2014). Individual tourists can now identify options and make purchases online, especially for simpler and less expensive components (Abou-Shouk, Lim, & Megicks, 2013; Berne, Garcia-Gonzalez, & Mugica, 2012; Buhalis & Law, 2008; Del Chiappa, 2013; Guillet & Law, 2013; Inversini & Masiero, 2014). This has led to widespread partial disintermediation in high-volume low-price tourism distribution chains (Guillet & Law, 2013; Haynes & Egan, 2015; Huang, Huang, & Chen, 2004; Ling, Dong, Guo, & Liang, 2015; Novak & Schwabe, 2009; Roma et al., 2014; Song, van der Veen, Li, & Chen, 2012).

In low-volume high-price ("high-end") specialised sectors, however, travel agents have become information brokers, using their expertise to find lower prices or better experiences, or to research, plan, package and purchase customised itineraries for their clients (Buckley, 2014; Dolnicar & Laesser, 2007; Hudson, Snaith, Miller, & Hudson, 2001; Lawton & Weaver, 2009). Cash-

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rich, time-poor clients prefer to delegate their holiday choices to expert travel agents, to a greater degree than cash-poor, time-rich travellers (Buckley, 2014; Cheong & Miller, 2000; Park & Jang, 2013). In these higher-price, lower-volume specialised subsectors of tourism, therefore, travel agent decisions exert substantial influence on the financial success of individual tourism businesses and entire tourism destinations. The factors which these agents consider, and the processes by which they balance these factors to reach their final decisions, are therefore of considerable interest from both practical and theoretical perspectives (Lam & Hsu, 2006).

Decision processes have been studied intensively for individual tourists (Bargeman & van der Poel, 2006; Decrop & Snelders, 2005; Hsu, Tsai, & Wu, 2009; Jeng & Fesenmaier, 2002; Moore, Smallman, Wilson, & Simmons, 2012; Oh, 2013; Oppewal, Huybers, & Crouch, 2015; Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005; Smallman & Moore, 2010). They have also been studied for travel agents serving high-volume low-price sectors, where agent decisions are driven principally by sales commissions (Chen & Chang, 2012; Chow et al., 2015; Davies & Downward, 2007; Del Chiappa, 2013; Guillet & Law, 2013; Gustafson, 2012; Hong, Yan & Lu, 2013; Huang et al., 2004; Inversini & Masiero, 2014; Klenosky & Gitelson, 1998; Lawton & Page, 1997; Ling et al., 2015; Michie & Sullivan, 1990; Roma et al., 2014).

Paradoxically, however, decision processes have been much less studied for specialist agents in high-end tourism. Decision processes of high-end travel agents are difficult to dissect, because they are based heavily on confidential information and tacit expertise. To analyse these processes, naturalistic as well as rationalist approaches are required. Rationalist models assume that all relevant information is available in a form where different considerations can be aggregated and balanced against each other in a deterministic manner (Saaty, 2008; Thunholm, 2004). Such models are applicable, for example, to low-end travel agent decisions based largely on commission structures. Naturalistic models recognise that people often make decisions based on incomplete information, and may be influenced by context-dependent peripheral and emotional factors (Gore, Banks, Millward, & Kyriakidou, 2006).

Here, therefore we analyse decision processes for high-end travel agents in one specialist sector, namely luxury wildlife lodges and safaris in sub-Saharan Africa. High-end wildlife tourism operators worldwide rely heavily on small sets of specialised agents, in different countries of origin, to send them a steady supply of clients. Our approach and results are potentially applicable to most high-end tourism subsectors which rely on specialised agents.

2. Methods

Since luxury wildlife tourism is a large, multilingual sector, we focused on a restricted and coherent subgroup of travel agents with a single language and locality, namely Francophone Switzerland. We use an ethnographic approach, with a qualitative insider methodology. This was possible since A. Mossaz is a specialist high-end wildlife tourism travel agent based in the Geneva region, routinely booking wealthy French-speaking Swiss clients on wildlife-watching holidays in sub-Saharan Africa. She has held that position for over a decade. She left it for 3 years specifically to conduct this research, retained her connections within the group during the research, and has now returned to it. That is, she is a long-term member of the group studied here, subject to the same professional pressures and standards.

This insider approach provides access to ethnographic detail and insights not otherwise available, including the opportunity to interview agents repeatedly and to discuss findings iteratively from an insider perspective. Determining reliably how people make any particular decision is a difficult process. Individuals do not always

consciously identify, e.g.: what those decisions involve; what factors they consider and why; how and why they balance and prioritise such factors; and how explicit logical and utilitarian considerations may interact or be influenced by implicit emotional or affective factors. A multi-year ethnographic approach is the most reliable method to understand how decisions are made under such circumstances.

During this study in 2013–2015, 15 specialist French-speaking Swiss travel agents were booking luxury wildlife tours and lodges in sub-Saharan Africa. This study included all 15 of these agents. They were 30–60 years old, eight females and seven males. All were expert in luxury and wildlife tourism and had many years' experience in their current positions. A. Mossaz is a 16th member of this cohort. Her own experience aided in unravelling intangible factors and building the model of the decision process.

Semi-structured interviews with each of these 15 agents were conducted in French. To maximise the depth and reliability of the information obtained, each research subject was interviewed multiple times, over a period of months or years. Initial conversations were open and unstructured, leading gradually to questions about clientele, preferred suppliers, booking procedures, and decision factors and processes. Insider expertise and tacit knowledge were used to assist in obtaining critical information from each interviewee.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via Skype®. Each individual interview took 1–2 h. No inducements were offered, and interviewees were informed of the purpose of the research. Interviews were recorded, with permission. The recordings were analysed and coded manually, by listening to them repeatedly in the original language (French) in which the interviews were conducted. This approach was preferred to transcribing and electronic coding, in order to retain inflexions and implications in spoken language, regarding potentially sensitive information. In many cases, interviewees referred implicitly to issues, individuals or firms known to both interviewer and interviewee, but without naming them explicitly, because of concerns over ethical and professional protocols.

Our analysis follows a multi-stage grounded theory approach. First, we used an open basic coding process to identify tangible or extrinsic factors which agents say that they consider in making their decisions. We grouped these factors iteratively into higher-tier constructs or categories, following a standard qualitative deconstruction/reassembly process (Punch, 2014; Silverman, 2010). Second, we used axial coding (Punch, 2014) to identify the internal, intrinsic or psychological themes that arise repeatedly when agents described how they combine the extrinsic factors in order to arrive at a decision.

We included a reflexive test of reliability at each stage in the analysis, by presenting each step to the agents interviewed, and discussing it with them in detail. A number of earlier and simpler conceptual models were discarded as a result of this reflexive process, which provides high reliability and confidence in the final model. The major steps comprising the final model match how the agents themselves conceptualise their decisions. The finer-scale details, expressed in the external factors and internal themes, were not apparent to the travel agents themselves prior to this analysis, but were endorsed once the analysis was completed and presented.

3. Results

Open coding identified 30 individual external factors in 5 groups, summarised in Table 1, that are considered sequentially by these specialist travel agents in making their decisions. Axial coding yielded 4 coherent themes, discussed and illustrated below, that