Are Recommendations of Venturers Valuable?

- A Study of Word-of-Mouth Communication Behavior of Variety-Seeking Tourists and Opinion Leaders

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Abstract

Are Recommendations of Venturers Valuable? –

A Study of Word-of-Mouth Communication Behavior of Variety-Seeking Tourists and Opinion Leaders

Word-of-mouth communication is generally seen as particularly influential in consumer decision making. Most research is focused on the following questions. Do people give recommendations? How many people give recommendations? How often do they give recommendations? However, service providers need to know whose recommendations are more valuable for them. These people must be identified and encouraged to word-of-mouth communication. Therefore it is necessary to segment customers according to their influence on others. Recommendations of opinion leaders are assumed to be particularly influential. The results of our empirical study indicate that venturers are often opinion leaders at the same time.

JEL-Classification: M31

Keywords: word-of-mouth, opinion leadership, venturers, variety-seeking behavior
1 Word-of-Mouth Communication in a Services Context

There is wide agreement that word-of-mouth communication is particularly influential in consumer decision making, given that the sender of the information does not benefit (in a commercial sense) from talking positively about a service provider or a service experience (Bansal and Voyer 2000; Bristor 1990). In addition, it has been found that word-of-mouth is more important and effective for service purchase decisions than for the consumption of consumer goods (Murray and Schlacter 1990). This is because word-of-mouth offers solutions to some problems which are particularly associated with the consumption of services. Services are difficult to evaluate prior to the purchase. The intangibility of services, the uncertainty about the capabilities of the service provider and its willingness to serve, the complexity of a service, the number of firms involved in the production process of a service, the duration of the production process, and the often low information level the customer has are only some reasons leading to high perceived purchase risk of the customer. For example, deciding on a destination for vacation involves high risk for a tourist if he or she does not know the destination and the service providers at the destination from a former vacation. Word-of-mouth information from a noncommercial, personal source might help to reduce these risks (Arndt 1967; Murray 1991). Many services are also customized and must be tailored to the customer’s specific needs. In addition, services are often co-produced or even co-created with the customer (Tzokas and Saren 1997). Hence, often a high intensity of customer integration into the value-creating process can be observed (Homburg and Stock 2004). Therefore, close interaction between the customer and the supplier is often necessary (Zeithaml and Bitner 2000). Due to the individuality and the integration of the customer, comparability of services is often rather limited. However, word-of-mouth might even help to overcome that problem when experienced customers provide information about their perception of the general abilities and the motivation of the service provider. It is therefore not surprising that research found that word-of-mouth is important in shaping expectations about services (Zeithaml and Bitner 2000).

Service providers benefit from positive recommendations because they attract new customers and thus increase profits. This can also be illustrated using and extending the service-profit chain concept. The notion behind the service-profit chain is to link the inter-related variables service quality, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and profits in a meaningful way (Heskett, Sasser, and Schlesinger 1997). However, the outcome of higher profits from high service quality cannot be taken for granted. This is because there are factors moderating the
relationships between the variables in the service-profit chain (Heskett et al. 1997). One of these factors is variety-seeking behavior. It moderates the relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Customers might derive utility from a change of a service provider, and therefore switch to another provider at the next purchase. It is “switching for the sake of variety” (McAlister 1982, p. 141). For example, many people like to travel to a different destination each time they go on vacation, just because they want to see another place.

Therefore, the correlation between customer satisfaction, customer loyalty and returns is relatively weak. But, there is more than one link between customer satisfaction, loyalty, and returns. If customers are highly satisfied they probably recommend the service and new customers could be gained. So, inducing word-of-mouth is more important when variety-seeking behavior occurs in a services context.

2 Personality Types of Tourists

Though, to our knowledge, variety-seeking behavior in tourism has not yet received very much attention, personality types of tourists are discussed as a major influence on travel patterns and preferences. In tourism management, people who prefer to travel to novel and different destinations are called venturers or allocentrics. Dependables or psychocentrics, on the other hand, are people who prefer familiar destinations and go back time and again to the same destination. This typology goes back to Plog’s (1974) classification of the U.S. population along a psychographic continuum. At one extreme are dependables. These people tend to be self-inhibited and low risk-taking. They like to be able to plan their lives. In addition, they prefer going to same and familiar places. They also like familiar activities at the destination, package holidays, and well-developed destinations with many hotels, restaurants, etc.

At the other extreme are venturers or allocentrics, who are self-confident, curious and moderately adventurous people. Traveling takes a much more important place in their lives. Not only do venturers like to explore new destinations, but also do they tend to spend more of their income on travel expenses. They enjoy to experience other cultures and traditions and to interact with other people at their destination.

Plog (1974) further found that the U.S. population was almost normally distributed along a continuum between the two extreme types. Hence, most people fall in the group between
psychocentrics and allocentrics. If dependables (allocentrics) or venturers (psychocentrics) were measured on one dimension, they assumingly would be somewhat between. Plog (1974) labeled them as midcentrics. We disagree with the use of a one-dimensional scale because we assume that people could be venturers as well as dependables regarding their traveling behavior. This also implies that many people show typical travel patterns of both types. In our empirical study (which will later be described in detail), 17% of the respondents traveled to one destination again and again but also to a lot of different destinations at other times. They show, for example, inertia behavior in their winter vacation and variety-seeking behavior in summer vacations.

Therefore, in destination management it is not enough to simply classify people in two groups: dependables and venturers, or loyal guests (inertia tourists) and variety-seeking tourists. It is necessary to get a better understanding of people’s motivations to come back to a destination again and again or to travel to many different places. However, we argue that venturers have a variety-seeking motive or a variety-seeking tendency. Venturers are an important cluster in tourism where the link between customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and returns does not work. Thus, the link between variety-seeking behavior and recommendations should be discussed in more detail.

3 Variety-Seeking Behavior and Recommendations

Variety-seeking behavior of consumers has received considerable attention in marketing literature (e.g. Hoyer and Ridgway 1984; McAlister and Pessemier 1982). However, the focus of past research has been on consumer goods. Variety-seeking behavior in services markets has not been widely discussed, yet. However, in the tourism industry, variety-seeking behavior is very likely to occur. Previous research revealed that variety-seeking behavior often occurs when consumers derive great hedonic choice from a product or service category (Inman 2001; Inman 2003; van Trijp, Hoyer and Inman 1996). In addition, the choice of a vacation destination is often driven by considering it as a means for self-expression. Consumers can demonstrate what they are or what they want to be by their choice of destination. Considering a choice as an act of self-expression might enforce the tendency to seek variety (Kim and Drolet 2003).

For destination management organizations or hotels, restaurants, and other service providers at a particular destination, variety-seeking tourists are often not the most loved guests. Only if variety-seeking behavior is related to the variety of sports and leisure activities and not to the
destination itself (e.g. to the surrounding nature etc.), it can relatively easily be managed by offering a broad variety of activities at the destination. Also, variety-seeking behavior between different destinations is not a problem for tour operators or hotel chains because they can keep tourists within their own chain by multiplying their hotel concept at different destinations, for example Robinson Club. Problems arise for destination management organizations if variety-seekers prefer to switch between different destinations or different types of vacation because it is very likely that these people do not come back. They will not add to future revenues and new guests need to be attracted as compensation, which is often very expensive. Even offering very high service quality cannot prevent customer defection. This often leads destination managers to the assumption that it is not worthwhile to invest in satisfying variety-seeking tourists.

The service-profit chain must be extended. Variety-seeking tourists might not come back, even if they are highly satisfied or even delighted with their vacation. However, highly satisfied customers are likely to engage in positive word-of-mouth communication (Anderson 1998; Bone 1992). Positive word-of-mouth communication will hopefully attract new customers, and hence lead to higher revenues. Moreover, effective recommendations help to establish a good reputation, which will also increase profits in the long run. In addition, dissatisfied customers might spread negative word-of-mouth leading to lower customer loyalty and negative consequences for the attraction of new customers (Richins 1983). Therefore, customer satisfaction is central for realizing profits. But, the question is: Are all recommendations effective, and if not, who gives recommendations, which have an influence on potential customers? This is discussed in the opinion leader literature.

Opinion leaders give recommendations to others which are assumed to be particularly influential. They often have superior knowledge on the subject and are motivated to tell others about it (Gilly et al. 1998). Research on opinion leadership further supports the proposition that they have greater product or service experience and therefore greater knowledge about product or service alternatives (Mitchell and Dacin 1996). Other studies discover that they also have enduring high product involvement (Bloch and Richins 1983; Jacoby and Hoyer 1981).

It becomes obvious that these characteristics show some parallels to venturers and variety-seeking tourists, respectively. They have great experience because they travel a lot and like to travel to many different destinations. Traveling occupies an important place in their lives
indicating that their involvement in the subject is probably high. They are outgoing, inquisitive, curious and enjoy communicating with people (Goeldner and Ritchie 2003). Thus, it makes sense that they are willing to share their knowledge and experience with other people.

Taking these insights into account, it seems plausible that variety-seeking tourists are often also opinion leaders. If that is true, variety-seeking tourists should be treated even more carefully as valuable customers because that increases the probability that they tell others about their experience. The probability of sending positive word-of-mouth information might still be higher for loyal guests, because they feel more attached to the destination. Yet, their recommendations might not be as influential as recommendations of variety-seeking tourists because they do not have such extensive experience with different destinations that they could compare. However, the influence of personal information sources depends on the perception of their knowledge or expertise by the receiver.

As opinion leadership is based upon personal communication, typical recipients of word-of-mouth communication are family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, etc. In other words, opinion leaders exert their influence in their own social group, which becomes a powerful communication network (King and Summers 1970). As variety-seekers might be opinion leaders at the same time, relationships with customers who may never come back must be developed in order to get access to this network.

Opinion leaders must be identified by service providers and encouraged to tell others about their experience. Identifying opinion leaders is not simple (Yale and Gilly 1995). As we propose that parallels between variety-seekers and opinion leaders might exist, opinion leaders could be addressed by identifying variety-seekers, which might be easier.

Hence, the research questions of this study are the following:

1. Which people are providers of influential word-of-mouth information?
2. Are venturers (or variety-seeking tourists) potential opinion leaders?
3. Which characteristics do these individuals have that enable service providers to identify and specifically encourage them to give word-of-mouth information to others?
4 Method and Procedure

4.1 Research design

A major goal of this research was to try to characterize individuals who serve as information sources about vacation destinations for others. In the past, a number of different methods for identifying these information providers have been used. Sociometric analysis or the use of key informants are methods to identify important information sources within one particular social group by interviewing individuals of that social system (Goldsmith and Desborde 1991). Sometimes, researchers directly observe interactions of group members in order to identify information providers. All these methods are relatively time-consuming, and results depend on the knowledge and insight of the informants used or on the observation skills of the researcher (Yale and Gilly 1995). Therefore, the method most frequently used is self-designation. Using a standardized scale, individuals are asked to report on their perception of their role as information source (e.g. Chan and Misra 1990; Childers 1986; King and Summers 1970). However, self-reporting bias might affect reliability of the results obtained. Yale and Gilly (1995) found in their dyadic study on word-of-mouth communication that only 41% of the self-perceived opinion leaders were perceived as opinion leaders by the recipient. Rarely, studies have been conducted where both the information provider and the receiver have been included (e.g. Arndt 1967; Brown and Reingen 1987; Yale and Gilly 1995). When investigating the influence of word-of-mouth communication this is a desirable method because perceptions of both parties about the strength of the influence of communication processes can be assessed. However, this method is often not practical because it requires that both the information provider and the receiver stand by and can be included.

This study is a first step to explore the links between the type of tourists (venturers or dependables) and opinion leaders regarding their recommendation behavior. This is why we used in-depth interviews.

We decided to focus on the recipients’ perceptions of the information provider because the receiver is the person who can tell whether the information had an effect on his actual behavior. We then asked them to describe the information source in more detail, particularly concerning their personal characteristics and their knowledge in the field.
4.2 Characteristics of the Sample

The empirical study consists of a total of 136 in-depth interviews, which were conducted from June to August 2004. Interviews were conducted at three different destinations in Germany (two destinations) and Switzerland (one destination).

During the interviews, participants were asked whether they had received a recommendation for that particular destination. If so, they were further asked if they were able to provide some more information about the person who gave the recommendation. Sample size was determined by the condition that 20 interviews with tourists who had received a recommendation should be completed for each destination in order to achieve adequate coverage.

Demographically, 51% of the respondents were male and 49% were female. 19% were between 20 and 29 years old, 35% between 30 and 44, 32% were between 45 and 60, and 14% were 60 years and older. Most people stayed four to seven days at the destination (45%), 34% stayed eight to 14 days, 18% stayed one to three days and only 3% spent more than two weeks at the destination. Forty-eight percent of the informants go on vacation once or twice per year, 40% undertake three to four vacation trips per year, 10% go on more than four vacation trips per year, and 2% do not go on vacation each year.

All respondents asked were leisure travelers, no business travelers were included. However, vacation types and motivations ranged from “just relaxing” (40%), “sports and physical activity” (31%), “visiting historical and archaeological sites, buildings and places and experiencing cultural entertainment” (17%) to “appreciating the nature” (1%) and a range of other reasons.

4.3 Category development and reliability

In order to be able to further analyze data, the responses must be classified into categories. Two judges independently developed mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories for responses. Comparison of the categorization schemes revealed that overall, agreement about the categories developed was .84, ranging from .60 to 1.00 for single questions. Disagreements were resolved by discussion. An average of seven categories was identified per question. The number of categories ranges from two to 10 across questions.

The two judges further sorted the responses into the categories developed. Interjudge reliability is a measure of whether two or more judges agree that a given response should be
classified into the same category (Gremler 2004). A number of reliability indices can be used to determine interjudge reliability. We used the coefficient of agreement $F_0/N$\(^1\) as this is the most commonly used reliability index (Gremler 2004). Questions where coding was rather unambiguous, for example simple yes/no-questions, were eliminated before calculation. The average percentage of agreement in this study was relatively high (.918), ranging from .727 to 1.000 across questions (see table 1 for details). One weakness of the coefficient of agreement is that it does not take the number of coding decisions into account. “As the number of categories decreases, the probability of interjudge agreement by chance increases” (Kolbe and Burnett 1991, p. 249). We therefore also used Perreault and Leigh’s (1998) reliability index $I_r^2$, because it takes the number of categories into account. The average Perreault and Leigh (1989) index $I_r$ across all questions is .946 ranging from .798 to 1.000 across questions (see table 1).

**TABLE 1: INTERJUDGE RELIABILITY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Question</th>
<th>Coefficient of Agreement $F_0/N$</th>
<th>Perreault and Leigh (1989) Reliability Index $I_r$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>.916</td>
<td>.952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>.938</td>
<td>.964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>.995</td>
<td>.997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>.917</td>
<td>.946</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>.853</td>
<td>.907</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>.727</td>
<td>.798</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
<td><strong>.918</strong></td>
<td><strong>.946</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) The coefficient of agreement is the total number of agreements between judges $F_0$ divided by the total number of coding decisions $N$.

\(^2\) $I_r = \left\{[(F0/N) - (1/k)] [k/(k - 1)]\right\}^{0.5}$, for $F0/N > 1/k$, where $k$ is the number of categories.
In content analysis research, the generally accepted rule of thumb for adequate reliability of coding decisions is a value of .80 (Gremler 2004). Apart from two reliability measures this value is exceeded. Overall, interjudge reliability is satisfactory.

5 Results and Discussion

Concerning the absolute frequency of word-of-mouth information being part of the decision for a destination, the study revealed that 44.1% of the respondents had received a recommendation for the destination. As one major interest of this study was to find out more about influential word-of-mouth sources, we further asked the respondents to characterize the information provider.

Only very few respondents (5%) were not able to give more information on the source. The high percentage of people who could give details makes sense because mostly, the word-of-mouth sources were friends (38.3%) or relatives (58.3%) of the informants. This also supports our proposition that word-of-mouth information generally diffuses within the social network of the information source. Only 3.3% of the respondents reported that the information was given from people other than friends or relatives. Hence, there are grounds for the assumption that trust in the information provider is important for the credibility and the influence of a source.

Corresponding to our proposition that variety-seeking tourists might often be influential sources of word-of-mouth information, 61.7% of the respondents reported that their information source likes to travel to many different destinations. In addition, 16.7% stated that the information provider is a loyal guest of this particular destination but also likes to travel to different places. This is also in line with previous research that revealed that influential sources tend to have greater product or service experience and therefore greater knowledge about alternatives (Mitchell and Dacin 1996).

A comparison of word-of-mouth information given by venturers on the one hand and dependables on the other supports the assumption that venturers are more likely to be opinion leaders than are repeat visitors of only one destination. Our study revealed that information sources who are venturers are more often perceived to have great knowledge on travel and destinations. Also, recipients of word-of-mouth information more often described venturers as individuals who have great interest on traveling compared to other people. Further, venturers seem more often to be highly involved in tourism, as recipients of word-of-mouth sources...
who are venturers reported that their sources gather a lot of information before they decide on a vacation destination themselves. However, the study did not support our assumption that venturers are more often perceived as experts in tourism. We assume that this finding is partly due to the fact that the term “expert” is often associated with a professional role. Informants might not see their information provider as an expert because the source is not professionally involved in tourism. Therefore, the term expert should be avoided in consumer surveys, as researchers and consumers might interpret it differently.

**TABLE 2: RESULTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of WOM sources described as</th>
<th>% of all respondents</th>
<th>Significance of Pearson’s $X^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Venturer</td>
<td>Dependable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word-of-mouth source has great knowledge on traveling and destinations.</td>
<td>67.6%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word-of-mouth source has a great interest on traveling compared to other people.</td>
<td>86.5%</td>
<td>58.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word-of-mouth source gathers a lot of information before deciding on a holiday destination.</td>
<td>77.1%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word-of-mouth source is an expert in tourism.</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another interesting finding was that information providers and recipients often have a lot in common, which is in line with previous research that revealed that homophilous sources of word-of-mouth information will have greater influence (Brown and Reingen 1987; Price and Feick 1984). A great proportion of respondents (69.5%) stated that they have some similarities with their sources. Most often similar interests in general (30.9%) were mentioned. Recipients also perceive great similarity with the source regarding personal characteristics (20.6%) and values (7.4%). Further sources and recipients often prefer similar vacation types and destinations (61.7%). Very often this was the reason why the source was...
selected by the information seeker (50.0%). However, results suggest that word-of-mouth information was frequently not actively sought by the receivers. Instead, information providers gave the information voluntarily during conversations (17.4%), indicating that these people are often very communicative.

6 Implications

The findings in our study suggest that information seekers are likely to select a source who they perceive to have great expertise. This expertise can be derived from extensive information search and analysis which is usually done when involvement in the product or service is high (Zaichkowsky 1985). However, previous research also suggests that product knowledge is causally linked to product experience (Punj and Staelin 1983). In the context of people deciding on a destination for their vacation, people who have already traveled to lots of different destinations are ideal information providers. They have great knowledge about alternatives and are therefore able to provide recipients with the extensive knowledge they are seeking.

The importance of the information providers’ expertise suggests that highly influential word-of-mouth information is often given by opinion leaders. Hence, they must be identified and encouraged to tell others about their experiences with the service provider. Our study further revealed that opinion leaders in tourism often seem to be variety-seeking tourists at the same time. Previous research on opinion leadership showed that it is not easy to identify opinion leaders, which would be necessary in order to encourage them to tell others about their experience (Yale and Gilly 1995). It might be easier to try to identify variety-seeking tourists by talking with them about their travel preferences. This should be relatively easy in tourism because there is often close interaction between tourists and the service providers. We further found that opinion leaders are very communicative. Hence, relationships with variety-seeking customers should be developed. Although these customers won’t come back, at least in the short run, they act as a sales force for the service provider. As such, they are the service provider’s gateway to their own social network of relationships. These relationships are the basis for the acquisition of new customers. In addition, through the network of customers the reputation of the service provider increases and secures profits in the long run.
7 Conclusions

The results of the empirical study indicate that many influential word-of-mouth sources are very interested in traveling and have great knowledge of the subject. Partly, their knowledge stems from extensive experience, as information providers are often venturers who travel to many different places. In other words, variety-seeking tourists seem to be very likely to be opinion leaders at the same time. This result might help service providers to address opinion leaders because past research on opinion leadership has shown that identifying influential sources is not straightforward. It might be easier to identify variety-seeking tourists by finding out more about people’s travel preferences. In tourism, this should be comparably easy as there is often close interaction between tourists and the service providers, so that they can be encouraged to give word-of-mouth information to others. As a result, initiating and maintaining relationships with variety-seeking customers is worthwhile as they are important sources of word-of-mouth information.

The findings of this study are subject to limitations that must be noted. The findings for our example in the tourism industry might not apply to other service industries. We believe that services where trust is substantial are very different, for example financial services or medical services. In these areas we assume that customers are not interested in variety-seeking behavior, but prefer long-term relationships with the service provider. Further, sample size was rather limited. Generalizability of the study is also limited by the use of a convenience sample. Future research testing hypotheses on a large scale would be interesting.

In order to gain a broader picture on word-of-mouth communication processes and their relevance for consumer decision making, a parallel study among personal information sources and recipients should be conducted.
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