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The Use of Adventure Travel in the Meeting Planning Industry

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Abstract

This study investigates the types of adventure travel activities, ecotourism, soft-adventure, or hard-adventure activities, that meeting planners have used, and if the type of activity used varies by meeting planner type. Surveys were completed by one hundred and eighteen purposefully selected meeting planners. The sample included corporate, association, independent, incentive and other meeting planners from the United States and Canada. Overall, independent planners utilized the most activities across all three adventure travel categories, followed by incentive travel planners. Corporate, association, and other meeting planners did not seem interested in using adventurous activities at meetings.

Introduction

Adventure tourism, or adventure travel, is very popular in the United States today. In 2005, 59.5 million Americans took a vacation in order to participate specifically in an outdoor or adventurous activity (Outdoor Industry Association, 2006). Men and women of all ages are seeking ways to get a little more adventure into their lives. At a recent conference of health care workers for the elderly the key note speaker asked the audience if they wanted more or less adventure in their lives. The entire room responded by saying they wanted more. An adventure will be personal; a walk through the streets of Chicago may be an adventure for one person while another person may consider that to be a normal, everyday activity. Other adventurous activities may include hiking, biking, rafting, a cultural tour, or even bird watching. Society is now looking more to these sorts of activities as a means of satisfying their adventures.

While more people are looking to participate in adventurous activities, the meeting planning industry is looking for ways to WOW its clientele. Using adventure travel and related activities is one way for them to do so. A successful meeting planner will keep clients coming back again and again as long as the planned meetings are new and exciting. Planners are constantly looking for ways to provide value to their meetings, incentives, or events. By incorporating adventures into their programs, meeting planners may be able to appeal to attendees on a personal level as well as on a business level. Adventures can be used by planners to create unique experiences that deliver long-lasting memories. By providing opportunities to challenge themselves and satisfy attendee's personal travel objectives, planners can increase the satisfaction of their attendees. The bottom line for planners is that every opportunity to increase

attendee satisfaction should be considered. Attendees who are satisfied are more likely to return year after year.

The purpose of this study is to examine the types of adventure travel activities that meeting planners utilize and if the use of these activities varies by meeting planner type such as corporate, association, incentive, and independent planners. The specific objective is to investigate the extent to which soft, hard, and ecotourism adventure travel activities vary by meeting planner type. It is hoped that the results of this study will create an understanding as to what specific adventurous activities might best be utilized by different types of meeting planners.

Literature Review

The *Professional Convention Management* (1996) defines a meeting manager as a "person whose job it is to arrange every aspect of planning and conducting a meeting or convention (syn: planner)" (p. 743). Meeting planners can be categorized according to the type of work that they perform. Corporate planners usually work within one company and may be responsible for special events, product launches, seminars, retreats, training sessions, or incentive programs for their specific company. Incentive planners work to create motivational programs for companies. Some companies have their own incentive planners while other companies hire an incentive planner. Association planners work for one association and usually are responsible for planning annual conventions as well as regional events. Independent planners may be contracted by a variety of organizations and could be responsible for the same events that corporate, incentive, or association planners are responsible for. Additional types of planners include non-profit and government planners.

Adventure Travel

Adventure travel grew out of a category of special interest tourism. Derrett (2001) explains, that special interest tourism is "the provision of customized leisure and recreational experiences driven by specific interests of individuals and groups" (p. 3). Other types of special interest tourism include ecotourism, nature tourism, and adventure tourism. Adventure tourism began to grow as travelers became more interested in "experiencing" a vacation by participating in specific activities (Sung, 2004).

Adventure travel can be anything from hiking in the woods to a white water rafting trip to bungee jumping in New Zealand. It is the interpretation of adventure by each participant that makes it difficult to define adventure travel. Sung, Morrison, and O'Leary (1997) have attempted to clarify the definition of adventure travel through empirical research using the provider's perspective. No clear definition was found to be satisfactory to a majority of the survey participants. However, several major components were identified to be associated with adventure travel, which include: activity, motivation, risk, performance, experience, and environment. Sung et al. (1997) proposed a new definition of adventure travel which is: "A trip or travel with the specific purpose of active participation to explore a new experience, often involving perceived risk or controlled danger associated with personal challenges, in a natural environment or exotic outdoor setting" (Conclusion section, ¶ 3).

The Travel and Tourism Analyst (2001) defines adventure travel as "A leisure activity that takes place in an unusual, exotic, remote or wilderness destination. It tends to be associated with high levels of activity by the participants, most of it outdoors. Adventure travellers expect to experience varying degrees of risk, excitement and tranquility and to be personally tested. In particular they are explorers of unspoilt exotic parts of the planet and also seek personal

challenges" (p. 1). These definitions emphasize personal challenges or being personally tested as a major component of adventure travel.

Additionally, Sung et al. (1997) identified the most popular words or phrases used to describe adventure travel. The most popular was 'participation in physical activities' followed by 'out of the ordinary', 'fun and excitement' and 'environment and resources.' The greatest benefit of adventure travel to travelers was found to be "discovering new experiences' followed by 'increased sense of personal growth'.

Types of Adventure Travel

There is no strong consensus on a definition of adventure travel (Sung et al., 1997). Many types of travel can therefore come under the umbrella of adventure travel. This study identified three major categories of adventure travel: hard adventure, soft adventure, and eco-adventure travel.

Hard adventure travel often encompasses the highest degree of risk and requires participants to be physically and mentally fit. Participants must be prepared for a wide variety of weather conditions, accommodations, and dietary restrictions. Examples of hard adventure activities are climbing expeditions, class V+ river rafting, long treks, rock climbing, wilderness survival, and mountain biking (Adventure Travel Society, 2002). Goodnow (2002) explains that hard adventure travel is characterized by "travel to novel or exotic destinations, a higher risk factor of activities that may require greater skill(s) and a higher intensity level of activities" (p. 1). A safari to Kenya that involved backpacking with a heavy backpack, carrying all food and supplies would qualify as hard adventure travel (Goodnow, 2002).

Goodnow (2002) also characterizes soft adventure travel by traveling to exotic, new locations. That is where the similarities to hard adventure travel end. Soft adventure travel

involves "low risk activities (perceived or true), low intensity activities, high quality food,

quality lodging and transportation" (Goodnow, 2002, p. 1). Soft adventure travel requires less

physical risk and little or no experience. Many activities are very similar to hard adventure

travel, but occur at a less demanding level. For example, class III river rafting is much less

demanding than class V and is therefore considered soft adventure. Other examples of soft

adventure include horseback riding, sea kayaking, snorkelling, biking, cross country skiing, dog

sledding, fishing, sailing, snowmobiling, surfing, and walking tours (Adventure Travel Society,

2002). A safari trip to Kenya and staying in a luxury tented safari camp with gourmet food,

showers, and guided tours also qualifies as an example of soft adventure travel (Goodnow,

2002).

Ecotourism is nature based and involves experiencing natural areas and local cultures.

Björk (2000) defines ecotourism as "an activity where the authorities, the tourism industry,

tourists and local people co-operate to make it possible for tourists to travel to genuine areas in

order to admire, study and enjoy nature and culture in a way that does not exploit the resources,

but contributes to sustainable development" (p. 199). Examples of ecotourism include

photographic safaris, bird and wildlife viewing, cultural tours, and archaeological digs

(Adventure Travel Society, 2002).

Some would argue that ecotourism is not a part of adventure travel (Travel & Tourism

Analyst, 2001; Weaver, 2001). Ecotourism places the importance of travel on learning about the

environment and sustaining that environment. Adventure travel, on the other hand, is activity

based (Weaver, 2001). The Travel and Tourism Analyst (2001) explains "Whilst adventure

travel involves a challenge to the individual, ecotourism stresses the total environment, of which

the individual is but a part and conservation is the main focus. Therefore, whilst adventure travel

may, in some instances, be classified as ecotourism, they are different categories of travel

although there is often considerable overlap" (p. 2). While ecotourism is not adventure tourism

specifically, it is used as a part of adventure travel in this study because of the significant overlap

between the two.

Reasons for Meeting Planners to Use Adventure Travel

There are a variety of reasons why a meeting planner may choose to incorporate

adventure travel into their programming. Ultimately the goal of every planner is to create long-

lasting memories, good feelings, and a desire to return to the program the following year.

Associations want members to attend the next year's conference. Incentive planners want

employees to participate in the following year's reward program. Corporate planners want

employees to remain positive about the company and to stay with the company, avoiding

excessive turnover.

Adventure travel may be used to help achieve a planner's goals through a number of

ways. Creating unique experiences can help create long-lasting memories and feelings of

goodwill. Adventure travel allows people the opportunity to balance work and personal lives.

Attendees may be able to fulfill their own personal desires while on a business trip by

participating in an adventurous activity.

Any meeting planner wants to create a WOW factor regardless of what type of meeting,

conference, retreat, or incentive they may be planning. Creating an experience that makes

people remember the event and want to participate in future events helps to achieve a primary

goal; keep participants interested and coming back. Meeting planners must be imaginative in

how they create unique experiences and provide new opportunities to keep the WOW factor

going year after year. Michael Steiner, vice-president of Gorp.com, an adventure travel outfitter,

says "what people are really looking for are 'experience' trips that will give them lasting memories and a new perspective of a different culture and, most of all, teach them something new" (Benitez, 2000, p. 86).

Creating unique experiences can simply involve creating an entirely different type of environment. For example, iExplore (2006), a large adventure travel supplier, can arrange a series of adventure events at a local mall, or create a city and desert "race" to add to a meeting that might be held in Las Vegas. Isolated environments can be a catalyst for getting a group to start thinking in new ways. For example, many successful retreats are held at dude ranches or wilderness lodges.

As people spend more time sitting at their desks there is an increase in desire to be more active and to spend more time outdoors. In 2005, approximately 59.5 million people took a vacation with the primary purpose of experiencing an outdoor adventure or adventurous activity (Outdoor Industry Association, p. 229). Research has shown that adventure travellers are an equal mix of male and female who range in age from 25 to 80 years old (Mallett, 2002). Baby boomers are actually the largest group of outdoor recreationists at 33%. They are followed by 16 to 24 year olds (26%) and 35 to 44 year olds (20%) (Outdoor Industry Association, 2006).

One of the many reasons to participate in adventurous activities is the desire to have a peak experience and to seek out personal insights. The "risk theory" of adventure suggests that the adventurer is willing to take risk for both personal pleasure and the emotional rewards received by experiencing the adventure. Risk-taking adventures have been related to "self-actualization" and "peak experiences." In this respect, outdoor adventures aimed at skill development against risk and challenges provide opportunities to have peak experiences and potentially achieve self-actualization (Walle, 1997). Adventure travel enables participants to

achieve new personal goals and further their own development. Adventure travel satisfies personal motivations, provides insight, and helps people to balance work and life demands.

Methodology

Sample and Instrument

The study aimed to reach those people who identify themselves as meeting planners and who have experience in the meeting, convention, event, or incentive industries. Meeting planners within Canada and the United States were contacted through the MIMlist (a free, email based discussion group for the meetings industry), the American and Canadian members of the Society of Incentive Travel Executives (SITE), and the Independent Meeting Planners Association of Canada (IMPAC). The survey questions were developed after conducting an extensive literature review. The principles outlined in Dillman (2000) were used in wording and ordering the survey questions. The survey, including both scale and open-ended questions, was pre-tested on faculty and graduate students for wording and layout. The first section of the survey included definitions of adventure travel and asked respondents for the type of adventure activities they have used in meeting planning previously. In other sections, they were asked for their professional and demographic profile. An email was sent to the members of the MIMlist, IMPAC and SITE informing them of this study and providing a link to the web survey. A reminder e-mail was sent two weeks after original e-mailing. Non- probability sampling was used and the survey was available on the website for a period of 18 days. Data were collected from a convenience sample of 118 meeting planners who responded to the survey.

Data Analysis

Multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) was utilized to examine the relationship

between meeting planner types and use of adventure travel activities. Data were analyzed by

using ANACOR 4.0. MCA is an interdependence technique suited for analyzing multiple

categorical data simultaneously. A set of objects and attributes can be displayed graphically in a

joint space to demonstrate the relations among row and column variable categories, which can

hardly be revealed by multiple pair-wise comparisons (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998;

Weller & Romney, 1990). MCA is useful when Chi-square tests are significant. Otherwise, there

would be no significant association to describe (Weller & Romney, 1990). Therefore, chi-square

analyses were conducted to identify the variations (dependencies) in adventure travel activities

due to meeting planner type. Once the significant variations were detected, the tables were

aggregated in a multi-way matrix form to be used as input matrix for MCA.

Results

As indicated, 118 meeting planners who represented different areas of the industry

responded to the survey. Table 1 shows the breakdown of meeting planners. A cross section was

achieved with 23.7% of respondents being corporate planners, 23.7% independent planners,

21.2% association planners, 11.9% incentive planners, and the remainder being non-profit

planners, destination management companies, and sales managers (19.5%).

Table 1

Types of Planners

Type of planner	Number	%
Corporate	28	23.7
Independent	28	23.7
Association	25	21.2

Incentive planner	14	11.9
Other Planner Types	23	19.5

Note: n = 118.

The study focused on three main categories of adventure travel: ecotourism, soft

adventure, and hard adventure travel. For ecotourism tours, the two-dimensional generated map

is shown in Figure 1. The first dimension explained 66.5% of the variance while the second

dimension explained 22.4% of the variance, a total variance of 88.9%. The map indicates that

independent and association meeting planners are more likely to use cultural tours and easy hike

tours whereas incentive planners prefer safari and wildlife viewing tours. Other planners use

more photography and bird watching tours than corporate, association, independent or incentive

planners. Corporate planners do not seem to have a particular preference as they are located in

the intersection of the two dimensions. The archaeological digs' distance from all meeting

planner types indicates that it is the least likely to be used by any planner.
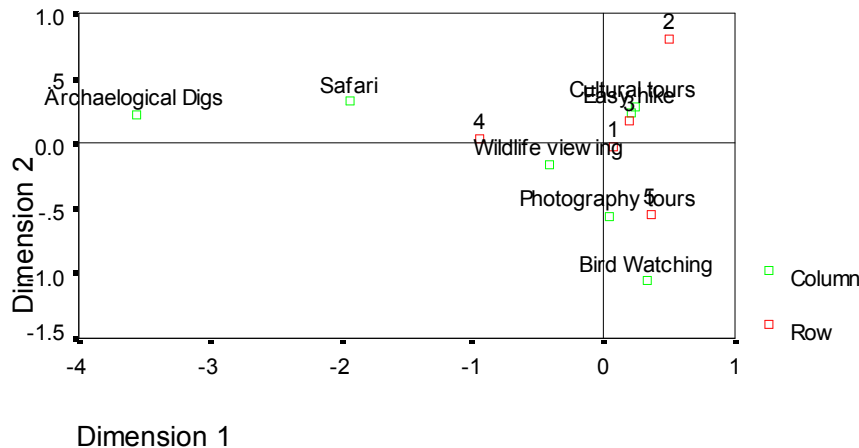
Row and Column Points
Symmetrical Normalization

Figure 1. The relationship between eco adventure tours and meeting planner types.

Note: 1 = Corporate planner, 2 = Association planner, 3 = Independent planner, 4 = Incentive

Planner, 5 = other.

For soft adventure tours, the analysis produced a two-dimensional map in which

dimensions 1 and 2 explain 50.4% and 27.2% of the variance, respectively (see Figure 2). The

second dimension separated corporate and incentive planners from other meeting planners. The

results indicate that corporate and incentive planners are more likely to use fishing, sailing, sea

kayaking, and snowshoeing. The independent planners, on the other hand, use downhill

skiing/snowboarding, snorkelling, and cycling, as well as horseback riding and canoeing more

than the corporate and incentive planners. Association meeting planners prefer cross country
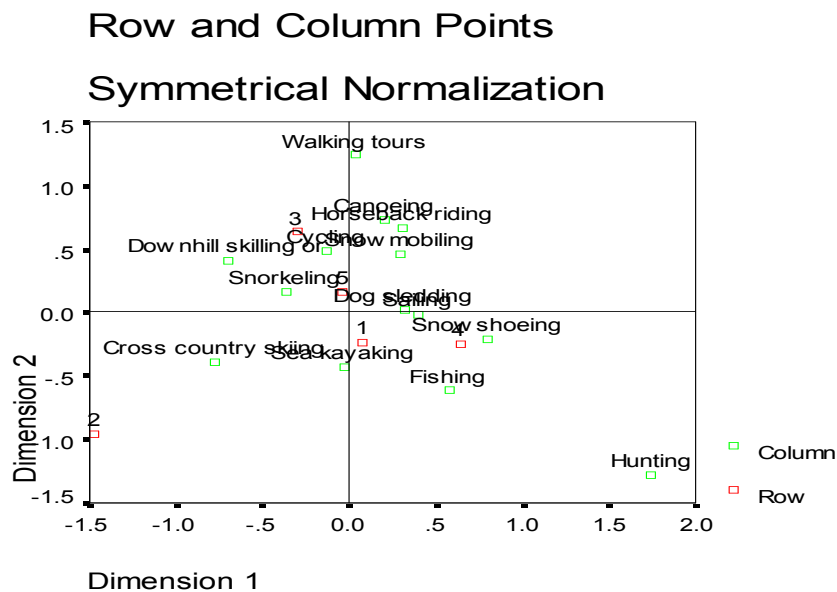
skiing as well as sea kayaking.

Figure 2. The relationship between soft adventure tours and meeting planner types.

Note: 1 = Corporate planner, 2 = Association planner, 3 = Independent planner, 4 = Incentive

Planner, 5 = other.

For hard adventure tours, the analysis produced a two-dimensional map in which

dimensions 1 and 2 explain 49.6% and 30.9% of the variance, respectively (see Figure 3). The

least used hard adventure tours across the board were wilderness survival and hang gliding. The

first dimension separated incentive planners from other meeting planners. The results indicate

that incentive planners are more likely to utilize scuba diving, whitewater rafting, and mountain

biking, which is not surprising. The independent planners, on the other hand, use long treks more

often. The corporate meeting planners did not exhibit any particular preference and were equally

likely to use the hard adventure tours included in the study. Finally, association meeting planners

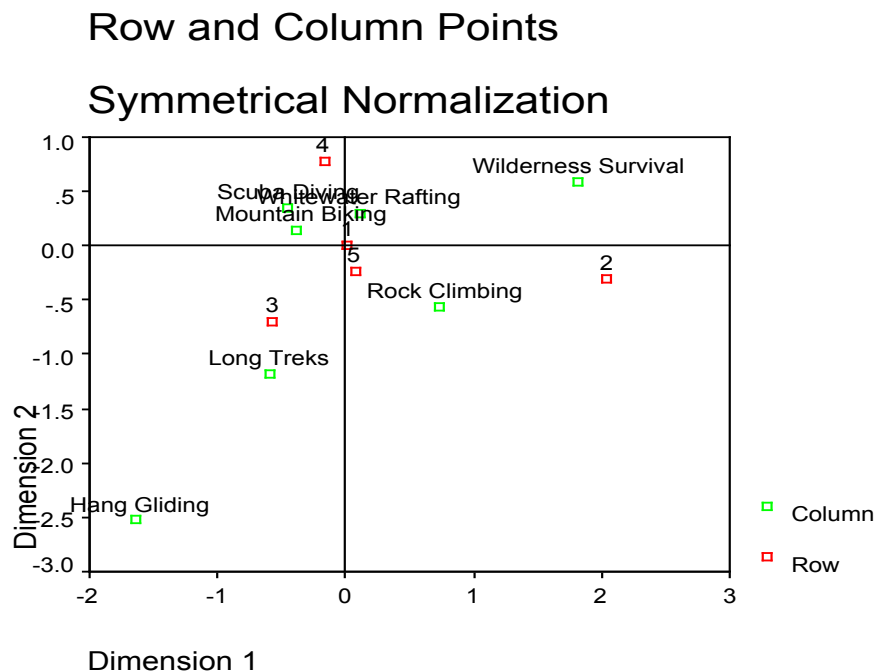had much more use of rock climbing than the other planner types.

Figure 3. The relationship between hard adventure tours and meeting planner types.

Note: 1 = Corporate planner, 2 = Association planner, 3 = Independent planner, 4 = Incentive Planner, 5 = other.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated the elements of adventure travel that different types of meeting planners use. The adventurous elements focused on ecotourism activities, soft adventure activities and hard adventure activities. The two most popular activities used were cultural tours (ecotourism) and walking tours (soft adventure), with the majority of all meeting planner types having used them. Independent planners used these two activities more often than any other meeting planner type. In fact, overall, independent planners utilized the most adventurous activities across all categories with incentive planners following closely behind. Corporate, association, and other meeting planners did not seem to utilize adventurous activities much at all. This may be related to liability or risk issues that may arise in specific companies. They may not be willing to take the risk that someone might get hurt. As one meeting planner wrote in the comments of the survey "For me, the liability risk in these types of activities is too high". Another offered this about mountain biking: "I've only seen the mountain biking used once and I would not suggest it again. There were a couple of injuries and not all participants were at the same skill or fitness level".

Incentive and independent planners, on the other hand, seem willing to take that risk. Perhaps this is because they are typically hired by a variety of organizations so they must have a wider range of ideas and activities available to offer their clients. One firm may want a cultural tour while another wants white water rafting or downhill skiing.

Regardless of the meeting planner type, the activity that is used must be applicable to all skill levels of the participants. Several meeting planners mentioned this in their responses. One said "Rock climbing is used only for those physically fit". Other comments included: "activities were incorporated as part of an adventure focused program so the itinerary encompassed each mandatory activity as a group excursion due to nature of participants all having a similar comfort level with adventure activities" and "they [the adventurous activities] are not suitable for a mixed-group , as all of these need specific skill sets and/or certifications".

The results of this study show that adventure travel is used by many types of meeting planners. As this study was exploratory in understanding the relationship between adventure travel and the meeting industry, more research needs to be done in a number of areas. For example, the meeting planners must have someone with expert experience to help them plan the activities. Research can be done on how meeting planners are finding those experts such as adventure travel outfitters and team building companies.   It would be interesting to determine if outfitters are hired on the basis of a referral or from their own marketing materials. What role does a convention and visitors bureau play, if any, in this relationship? What role does a government-run tourism authority play in connecting outfitters with meeting planners?

Another interesting research area would be one that addresses how meeting planners qualify their clients for adventurous activities. Does an independent meeting planner qualify clients, does the outfitter qualify them, or does the organization itself qualify them? What steps are taken to ensure that all participants can in fact participate or are willing to participate?

Not all meeting planners use adventurous activities to create WOW factors. Another study analyzing what other non-adventurous types of activities meeting planners use, and whether those activities are successful would provide a good comparison to this current study.

Finally, how does risk and liability affect meeting planner's decisions to use, or not use,
adventurous activities? Risk and liability play a large role in today's society; therefore a study
on how they affect the meeting planner industry in relation to the activities they use would prove
very useful to the industry.

This study had a number of limitations. The first is that adventure travel has not been
clearly defined in academic research or within the travel and tourism industries. Meeting
planners may not have participated in the survey believing that they do not use adventure travel,
and yet, they may use these activities and simply not consider them to be adventure travel.
Additionally the breakdown of types of adventure travel into soft, hard, or ecotourism activities
is subjective. These terms are also not well defined and could easily cause confusion within the
meeting planning industry.

This study explored how the meetings and adventure travel industries work together.
Specifically, it analyzed what types of meeting planners are using each of the adventurous
activities (ecotourism, soft adventure, and hard adventure). Meeting planners included corporate
planners, association planners, independent and incentive planners, and other planners. The
types of activities used did vary by meeting planner type. The independent planners utilized the
most adventurous activities while, at the other end of the spectrum, corporate and association
planners utilized very few activities, and did not seem to have much preference as to which
activities they did use.

As more people seek to escape from their desks to the outdoors, meeting planners are in
an optimal position. They can create appeal for their own programs by offering adventurous
escapes. This study shows all meeting planners what other meeting planners are using. Perhaps
one meeting planner never thought to incorporate adventurous activities into a meeting. Now

that planner can. Also, this study is a great resource for adventure travel outfitters and team

building companies. They, together with the meeting planners, can create special programs for

meetings that will WOW their clientele. Meeting planning and adventure travel are not

necessarily two industries that one would put together. There is a great potential, however, for

the two groups to work together in creating exciting meetings.

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