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What is in three words? Tourists' descriptions of the city of Wellington

In recent years, studies have underlined the importance of destination image, not only as a tool to understand travelers' destination choice, but also as an instrument to market places. Today, while many destinations benefit from a positive image, others still experience travelers' general lack of interest and in the process, potential opportunities to benefit from visitors may be lost. This study investigates the views of visitors to the city of Wellington in New Zealand, asking travelers to define the city in three words. Responses from 817 travelers were gathered from individuals traveling to (pre-visits) and from Wellington (post-visits). While the overall views of respondents are positive about the city, several responses also demonstrate that travelers leaving the city do not seem to remember the city for its culture, atmosphere, entertainment or numerous restaurants and nightlife establishments even though these are central aspects of Wellington's marketed image. In addition, some views are related to negative aspects of the city for travelers, including poor signage, noise and crowdedness. The research findings hold some interesting implications for city officials and tourist authorities who are responsible for the effective marketing of Wellington as a visitor destination.

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Abstract

In recent years, studies have underlined the importance of destination image, not only as a tool to understand travelers' destination choice, but also as an instrument to market places. Today, while many destinations benefit from a positive image, others still experience travelers' general lack of interest and in the process, potential opportunities to benefit from visitors may be lost. This study investigates the views of visitors to the city of Wellington in New Zealand, asking travelers to define the city in three words. Responses from 817 travelers were gathered from individuals traveling to (pre-visits) and from Wellington (post-visits). While the overall views of respondents are positive about the city, several responses also demonstrate that travelers leaving the city do not seem to remember the city for its culture, atmosphere, entertainment or numerous restaurants and nightlife establishments even though these are central aspects of Wellington's marketed image. In addition, some views are related to negative aspects of the city for travelers, including poor signage, noise and crowdedness. The research findings hold some interesting implications for city officials and tourist authorities who are responsible for the effective marketing of Wellington as a visitor destination.

Introduction and literature review

In the early 1990s, the concept of image destination was in its infancy stage and in need to develop "its marketing usefulness" (Ahmed, 1991, p. 25). Since then, numerous studies associated with image destination have been conducted (see for example Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Chang & Shin, 2004). Much of contemporary research underlines the importance of image destination as an influencing factor in tourists' decision-making process (Jensen & Korneliussen, 2002), and in choosing their destination (Hanlan & Kelly, 2005).

Moreover, for Konecnik (2005), “The role of the image concept is highlighted in today’s growing international tourism market and by the competition between destinations” (p. 262).

A number of studies also discuss the links of image destination with both destination marketing, and tourism destination brand image. Ahmed (1991), for example, explains that emphasis on destination marketing can help project positive images of particular destinations to potential consumer groups. Such an element highlights the critical aspect of conveying positive images as a tool to implement a successful marketing strategy. Further, “autonomous communication” (Hanlan & Kelly, 2005, p. 174), and particularly word of mouth can significantly influence destination brands and help in destination promotion and creation of an image (Hanlan & Kelly, 2005). Thus, the outcome of travelers’ experience at a destination can have a great impact on how destination brand is created (Hanlan & Kelly, 2005), and because of potential implications of marketing or ‘selling’ a destination, travelers’ views of a destination’s image are even more important than a marketer’s knowledge about the destination (Ahmed, 1991).

While image destination calls for marketing strategies designed to target specific consumer groups, Jensen and Korneliussen (2000) note that variations of image of a destination among different tourist market segments represent “an unsolved problem” (p. 320). In addition, lack of promotion in the form of an effective target and a theme, may in some cases result in failure to exploit tourism’s potential (Awaritefe, 2004). In this respect, a destination’s appealing image to its potential visitors would appear critical.

Tourism in New Zealand and Wellington

While international tourist numbers are rather modest in comparison to much more frequented tourist ‘hot spots’ around the world, the growing popularity of New Zealand as a tourist destination is clearly demonstrated in several dimensions. For example, in the last decade, the number of international travelers has increased steadily (Ministry of Tourism, 2006a) and with such an increase, these visitors’ expenditure has consistently grown (Ministry of Tourism, 2006b).

The city of Wellington, New Zealand’s capital, is the receptor of an important number of tourists that have a clear impact on the city’s economy. The \$1.09 billion worth of visitor spending in 2006 demonstrates such contribution (Ministry of Tourism, 2006c). For many ‘Wellingtonians,’ their city is the nation’s cultural, creative, headquarters and education capital (Positively Wellington Tourism, 2007). In fact, the city’s hospitality sector, famous for having a large variety of cafes and restaurants (Cossar, 2006; Lee-Frampton, 2006) appears to be in an excellent position as one of the main beneficiaries of visitors’ expenditures in the form of food and accommodation sales. However, despite the fact that many corporate travelers visit Wellington and the numbers of leisure visitors are currently growing, the city still appears to be lacking a tour circuit infrastructure (Pearce, Tan & Schott, 2004).

The present study explores the appeal of New Zealand’s capital, Wellington, to visitors in several dimensions. Of particular importance was to identify how visitors traveling to and out of Wellington describe this city in their own words. Moreover, the core question asked to travelers is to use three words to identify the city. This dimension may be

particularly useful for a better understanding of people's views of the city, with potential links and implications to the marketing of Wellington as a tourism destination.

Methodology

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used to design a questionnaire and collect data from individuals traveling to and from Wellington. Questionnaires were distributed within the ferry terminals of Wellington in the North Island and the town of Picton in the South Island, and on board the ferries as passengers traveled between both islands. Respondents traveling to Wellington were to rate their 'pre-visit' views, or expectations, while those leaving Wellington were to indicate their 'post-visit' views. The two questionnaires, whilst obviously different, were designed in such a way to allow for the effective comparison of data between the pre- and post-visit responses. A total of 817 travelers were approached and briefly introduced to the purpose of the study. One of the criteria in selecting participants was that they planned to stay (pre-visit), or had stayed in Wellington (post-visit) for at least one day. As would be expected, another criterion was that respondents did not reside in Wellington. In all, 353 responses were received, or a response rate of 43.2%, with 168 (47.6%) responses being obtained from people traveling to Wellington, and 185 (52.4%) from people leaving the city. Respondents were asked to describe Wellington in three words. The chosen words were collated into two separate groups, namely for those traveling to (pre visit) and from (post visit) Wellington.

Results

When respondents were asked to describe Wellington in three words, it became clear that most travelers associate the city with its windy weather, and to a much lesser extent, with the city's busyness. While it could be argued that these two most chosen words may have a

negative connotation, the overall findings in Table 1 demonstrate that travelers have positive views about Wellington. At the same time, several differences between pre visit and post visit views are identified. For example, it is noticed that among visitors leaving Wellington, the terms culture, atmosphere, history and fun are not among their most chosen words as compared to the responses among visitors traveling to the city. This outcome is rather surprising, in light of the reports emphasizing the large choices in nightlife and hospitality establishments in the city (Cossar, 2006; Lee-Frampton, 2006).

Table 1: 12 most popular words describing pre- and post-visit respondents' views of Wellington.

Words (Pre visit) *	f	%	Words (Post visit) **	f	%
Windy	44	26.2	Windy	50	27.0
Busy	21	12.5	Busy	31	16.8
City, capital	15	8.9	Friendly	28	15.1
Culture	12	7.1	Beautiful	26	14.1
Beautiful	12	7.1	Busy	25	13.5
Friendly	10	6.0	Clean	15	8.1
Fun	7	4.2	Interesting	15	8.1
Clean	6	3.6	Compact	12	6.5
Compact	5	3.0	Hilly	10	5.4
Vibrant	4	2.4	Vibrant	7	3.8
Interesting	3	1.8	Scenic	7	3.8
Cosmopolitan	3	1.8	Noisy, crowded	6	3.2

* n= 168; n=185

Further, six responses, if only representing 3.2% of participants leaving the city, identify negative views about noise and crowdedness in Wellington. In this regard, the written comments of 17 (4.8%) respondents also express negative views regarding the city's traffic, confusing signage, and in some cases unfriendly customer service. However, as the results below demonstrate, more of those leaving the city view Wellington in a positive manner, including its friendliness, greenness, beauty and cleanliness.

While it could be argued that the motivation of individuals traveling to (pre-visit) and leaving Wellington (post-visit) or that between domestic and international visitors may have

differed greatly in some respects, overall subtle differences between these groups are noticed. International respondents in this study, a total of 187 (53%) are more numerous than domestic, with 165 (46.7%) respondents, while one respondent did not indicate his/her origin. Table 2 indicates that a larger percentage of domestic visitors leaving the city view Wellington as ‘interesting’ and ‘busy’ than do members of the same group traveling to Wellington. Among international respondents, however, fewer from those leaving the city consider it ‘busy’ but significantly more of those leaving view Wellington as friendly. More international respondents also consider Wellington a clean city, as compared to their domestic counterparts. That international respondents appear to have more positive views about the city may have implications in several regards, including the future marketing of the city to travelers of this group.

Table 2: 7 most popular words among pre- and post-visit, domestic and overseas visitors.

Domestic Pre-visit *			International Pre-visit ***		
Words	f	%	Words	f	%
Windy	40	47.1%	Capital	12	14.5%
Busy	9	10.6%	Windy	11	13.3%
Vibrant	7	8.2%	Busy	11	13.3%
Friendly	6	7.1%	Clean	7	8.4%
Interesting	4	4.7%	Friendly	5	6.0%
Alive	4	4.7%	City	5	6.0%
Cultural	3	3.5%	Fun	3	3.6%
Domestic Post-visit **			International Post-visit ****		
Words	f	%	Words	f	%
Windy	18	22.5%	Friendly	25	24.0%
Busy	12	15.0%	Hilly	13	12.5%
Interesting	10	12.5%	Windy	10	9.6%
Friendly	5	6.3%	Clean	7	6.7%
Entertaining	2	2.5%	Busy	6	5.8%
Cultural	2	2.5%	Scenic	5	4.8%
Cosmopolitan	2	2.5%	Compact	5	4.8%

* n= 85 ; ** n=83; *** n=80; **** n=104 Note: One respondent did not indicate his/her origin
 Wellington’s most popular tourism attraction is the National Museum of Te Papa Te

Tongarewa and it is estimated that 90% of all international tourists to Wellington visit Te Papa (www.tepapa.govt.nz). As such one may expect the words used to describe Wellington to focus more on the culture, history, natural history, contemporary culture and learning that

is synonymous with the experience of the National Museum. None of the most popular words chosen fall into this area of classification however, and this may suggest that although Te Papa is a primary motivating reason for many of the visits to Wellington, it does not significantly impact on the overall image of the city. This raises an interesting point about what factors contribute to create a destination's image. In this case the image of Wellington seems not to be based around the primary motivation to visit, the National Museum, but around other factors.

Conclusions

The collection of the data for this study involved asking respondents to describe the city of Wellington in only three single words. However, these three words can be a useful source for understanding the image of a destination such as Wellington. Overall, the findings support the view that understanding image is extremely important for the process of effectively marketing a tourist destination. Moreover, while further studies are needed to investigate Wellington's present and future appeal to visitors, the available results provide a number of insights about how different visitor groups perceive the city, and as a result several implications can be drawn. For example, visitors' views of Wellington may have potential implications for tourism stakeholders in their efforts to provide an attractive image of their city. Moreover, Wellington's tourism stakeholders might need to emphasize positive aspects that visitors tend to relate to, including cultural aspects, in the process of developing their own image destination. Future changing tourist demographics in both Wellington and New Zealand in the form of increasing numbers of international visitors and overall tourism expenditures suggest that continuous monitoring and implementation of marketing and organizational strategies are needed, not only to attract more visitors, but also provide them with a positive experience, and accommodate their needs.

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