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Where's the Practicality in Tourism Research?

Call me too practical, but many times with academic research I ask myself, “Who uses this stuff?” Or, even worse, I might occasionally wonder, “Who cares!” Another question, “Is this being used beyond the need for the author to place it in her/his academic evaluation file?” Okay, now that I’ve really thrown myself out there for the piranhas, let me explain. You may disagree with me, and that’s perfectly fine. This is my commentary!

First of all, I love research. The whole package of determining the question that needs an answer, creating a research design that results in valid and reliable data, collecting the data, looking at the data (most fun), and finally sharing what the data says for an audience is a powerful and exciting process. In the academic world, the acceptance of a peer reviewed article is the ultimate pat on the back from fellow academicians. But, to be honest, the pat on the back I strive for also comes from the Industry. If I put something out there, I want it used. A peer reviewed article is rarely read and understood by industry professionals. Go ahead and challenge me on this one but the jargon can be confusing, the statistics can be bewildering, and the applicability of the material say to a small bed and breakfast owner is not there. Hence, our journals talk to each other and that’s it.

It is my contention that if the purpose of your paper is to get it accepted into a peer reviewed journal, you have already failed. The purpose of all papers should be to help the travel industry, even if it’s one small spot on the planet. In order to help that small spot, however, you have to present your paper to the interested party either in a public forum (not an all-academic audience), one-on-one with the local CVB director/administrator/motel manager, or by mailing and making it available to the parties who could use the data. That’s not good enough, though. It is imperative that we show our audience HOW to use the information. It must have a degree of usefulness.

I define usefulness if someone can take your information presented and use it in their marketing plan, their development plan, or their policy decisions. Even if you are advancing theory, you should be able to explain how this theory development will help someone in the travel industry....they should be able to use parts of it right now. However, over the years I have seen many tourism researchers under the umbrella of “private researcher” provide information to practitioners that is widely acclaimed and used. These researchers have figured out how to sell their information to the public with a smile and a handshake. While it may appear useful, let us not forget that all data needs to be collected in a manner in which the validity and reliability of the information can be proven. Many times when private researchers are questioned more thoroughly about methodology or response rate or the representative sample used for generalizing to the population, the validity of their information is questioned because the answer is, “That’s proprietary.” Sadly, those validity questions don’t get asked enough and the

information is used unwaveringly. So, while I say your research has to be useful, it first must pass the rigor test.

While I have now managed to alienate both private researchers and academicians with my comments, it doesn't have to be that way. Over the years I have said that what our industry needs is a real bridge between academicians and practitioners. TTRA is one avenue that started out as that bridge but over the years it seems to have turned into the academic researcher talking about theory vs the private researcher seeking funding from states and DMO's. The two research groups happily attend TTRA as it does fit their needs. Networking among academicians works wonderfully and so does networking between private researchers and the DMO's. What I don't see very often are serious discussions taking place between the academic group and those who could and should be using their data – the DMO's. I also rarely see private researchers engaged in research discussions with the academic group.

How do we assure usefulness and rigor in our travel research? Here are some possible solutions:

1. I suggest that all refereed journal articles have a section discussing how the information was used or plan to be used by the appropriate parties. For example, if the article was discussing a decision-making model, what will the local CVB change or address in their marketing promotion to adapt to the findings? By giving this one example of how it was used, all other readers can see how they can connect to the same information.
2. A "Readers Digest" of travel research should seriously be considered. If academicians took me up on number 1 above, then "cutting and pasting" the applied section of the article into a Digest form could be easily read and used by the industry.
3. DMO's who use private research firms should have the research methodologies reviewed for validity and reliability. By doing this, the research presented can be useful and defensible.
4. The *Journal of Travel Research* could present two "Best Article of the Year" awards. One could be for the development and advancement of theory. The second could be for the practical application of the information.

In summary, research is a powerful tool. It can change marketing strategies. It can direct policy decisions. It can guide new development. If it doesn't stand up to the rigor of the scientific world, it shouldn't be used. If it doesn't provide solutions that are easily understood and applied by the industry, I question its usefulness.