



## Tourism-Marketing Performance Metrics and U Auditing of Destination Websites

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### TOURISM ADVERTISING AND MARKETING PERFORMANCE METRICS

Arch G. Woodside

#### **ABSTRACT**

Although scientific methods are available for evaluating the impact of intervention programs (e.g., plant growth of alternative seeds and soil treatments; consumer purchases of alternative prices, brands, and products; reforms such as regulations requiring wearing helmets by motorcycle riders), tourism marketing programs fail to use these methods. Traditional "conversion studies" - estimating the rate inquiries from tourism advertising convert into visitors by asking samples of inquirers if they visited – have fatal flaws in measuring whether or not the advertising caused visits to the destination that otherwise would not have occurred. The failure to stop doing traditional conversion studies to measure whether or not advertising causes visits appears to be an example of ignorance of ignorance, that is, tourism marketing executives do not have the knowledge and skills for applying effective methods to estimate the effectiveness of marketing and advertising's influence on causing visits, and they are unaware of their ignorance. What to do? New technologies in delivering advertising is decreasing the costs and efforts of using scientific methods for measuring advertising and marketing's impact

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on visits. Large, unobtrusive, scientific field experiments are appearing in the literature in the second decade of the 21st century. Good news at last?

### INTRODUCTION: WHAT CEOS AND LEGISLATORS WANT TO KNOW ABOUT TOURISM MARKETING PROGRAMS

Hospitality firm chief executive officers (CEOs) (and legislators evaluating state and national destination tourism marketing programs) want to know valid answers to three questions regarding tourism marketing programs. First, is a given advertising and marketing program generating customers (visitors) who otherwise would not have come without the implementation of the program? Second, is the advertising and marketing program causing changes in visitors' behaviors during their visit to the destination (e.g., do they do more activities, stay more nights, spend more money because of their exposure/use of the destination's advertising than these visitors would have done/spent without the advertising). Third, what is the financial return of the investment in the advertising and marketing program – revenues generate minus all costs associated with implementing the advertising or the marketing program?

Sometimes scholars and residents of a destination ask a fourth question. Are tourism marketing programs more beneficial than harmful to the well-being of local residents and the destination's environment? Do we really want to attract visitors?

Achieving valid (and favorable) answers to these issues is important for securing support from CEOs and legislators of tourism marketing programs. Methods that provide unambiguous answers that achieve high validity and reliability should be helpful for securing such support – or support a decision to cancel the program or to implement different programs. Implementing such performance research methods should be helpful in designing future tourism advertising and marketing strategies that are effective in increasing visitors and generating profits (e.g., sales taxes net of advertising costs) resulting from implementing the strategies.

Following this introduction, the next section briefly reviews industry standard practices in measuring advertising effectiveness by destination management organizations (DMOs). Fatal Flaws in Conversion Studies as Indicators of Advertising Causing Visits discusses the fatal flaws of in these industry standard practices.

Additional Serious Flaws in Conversion Studies for Comparing Alternative Campaigns and Media Vehicles Performances describes serious flaws in conversion studies event though conversion studies can be useful for comparing the performances of alternative marketing campaigns, media, and media vehicles. Quasi and True Experiments Useful for Measuring the Impacts of Advertising and Marketing Programs describes quasi and true experiments that are useful for measuring the impacts of advertising and marketing programs in causing visits and revenues for a destination that would not have occurred without the advertising or marketing program.

Do Destination Marketing Websites Provide Useful Information for Their Website Visitors? shifts the discussion by asking and answering whether or not destination marketing websites provide useful information for their website visitors. Boldly Predicting the Near-Future for Designing Effective Tourism Advertising and Marketing Programs boldly predicts the near future for designing effective tourism advertising and marketing programs.

DMO Executives and Scholars Working Together concludes the discussion with an appeal to DMO executives and scholars to start working together to end the widespread condition of ignorance about how to validly measure advertising's impact on tourists' visits and revenues for destination brands – brands like France, Florida, and Florence (countries, states, and cities that instruct their DMOs to design effective strategies that attract tourists to visit).

### STANDARD PRACTICES IN MEASURING TOURISM ADVERTISING AND MARKETING EFFECTIVENESS

"Conversion study" is the standard practice in measuring destination tourism advertising performance. Conversion studies usually include sending a questionnaire seven months or so after the advertising appears; the questionnaire is sent through the postal mail, by telephone, or by email to inquirers by using an address appearing in the advertising. The questionnaire or accompanying letter asks the inquirer to please respond to about 15–40 questions about their travel behavior; most conversion questionnaires focus most questions on one destination – the focal destination of the advertising. Most conversion studies identify the reason for the study in the survey or cover letter as an attempt to learn if the inquirer did or did not visit the destination since making the inquiry.

The typical conversion study reports 40–60 percent overall conversion rates of visitors from inquiries. For example, a conversion study might report that 250,000 visitors are estimated to have visited from the 500,000 inquiries received through the advertising program. The average total expenditures in the destination area for all categories asked in the survey might be \$1,000 per visit. Consequently, \$250 million might be reported as the total revenues generated from the advertising program (\$1000 times 250,000 visiting parties). If the total advertising expenditure equals \$5 million, the conversion study might include mention that the net revenue produced equals \$50 for every \$1 spent in the program.

Although important procedural advances improve tourism advertising conversion studies substantially (Woodside & Dubelaar, 2003), conversion studies still retain fatal flaws in reference to measuring whether or not tourism advertising causes visits and revenues that would not have otherwise been generated (Woodside, 1990). The basic research design for conversion studies remains unchanged since first appearing in the scholarly literature in articles by Woodside and Reid (1974, 1976).

### FATAL FLAWS IN CONVERSION STUDIES AS INDICATORS OF ADVERTISING CAUSING VISITS

Conversion studies do not include scientifically designed equivalent comparison groups to control for sources of invalidity. Sources of invalidity include external events other than the advertising that could be the much bigger influences than exposure to the advertising on causing visits – a generally very good year for travel possible in combination with very ineffective advertising by competing destinations could be the principal causes of high conversion rates. Along with this "history" source of invalidity, Campbell and Stanley (1963) describe 17 other sources of internal and external validity that could be substantial causes for an observed outcome other than a treatment influence such as advertising's influence on visits.

Campbell and Stanley's (1963) remarkable contribution is the first to describe "quasi-experiment" in the behavioral sciences. Some quasi-experimental designs include comparison groups that are not scientifically designed to be equivalent, but the designs are still useful for ruling-out some sources of invalidity. Thus, a researcher with knowledge and skill relating to controlling for sources of invalidity describes the use of "nonequivalent

control and test group designs." Campbell (1969) provides an insightful description of quasi-experiments of the impact of government programs attempting to influence citizens' behavior (e.g., government requirement for motorcyclists to wear helmets). Woodside, MacDonald, and Trappey (1997) provide details of a nonequivalent control and test group design to measure the impact of tourism literature on tourists' visits.

Scientifically designed, equivalent, comparison-groups designs include the use of control and treatment groups and random assignment of subjects to all groups. Random assignment is not the same thing as random selection. The objective of random assignment is to achieve statistical equivalence before administering the treatment to the subjects (exposing one group to advertising treatment X and a control group to placebo advertising Y).

Note that in a true experiment a proper control of subjects receives something – a placebo treatment. Having the control group receive nothing is a serious blunder because exposure alone to anything from the experimenter could be reason enough to cause the outcome under study. Thus, testing of the efficacy of Viagra's and other pills for temporarily eliminating "erectile dysfunction" and permitting sexual intercourse that includes ejaculation and orgasm among males who otherwise fail to achieve these outcomes includes a control group of men who receive a placebo (blue inert pill) and one or more treatment groups similar-looking blue pills but containing sildenafil citrate – the active ingredient that causes penis erections among certain groups of men (old guys).

The "placebo effect," also named the "Pygmalion effect" in education research and the "Hawthorne effect" in organizational studies, receives substantial in the scientific literature. The placebo effect is subjects' exposure to an inert treatment condition that results in a similar, or even better, performance than subjects exposed to the active treatment condition. Wikipedia.com includes 169 references in its discussion of placebo effects.

Wilcox and Woodside (2010) provide an example of a placebo effect in a true experiment in tourism website advertising. In the large, true, field experiment that Wilcox and Woodside report subjects exposed to the placebo advertising message opened the email message at higher rates than subjects exposed to alternative treatment advertising message. Wilcox and Woodside (2010) report that the advertising designed to cause increases in tourism-related behavior for the destination (France in the study) resulted in lower responses than the placebo advertising. Other studies report such less is more phenomena (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000).

How embarrassing is that for an advertising agency? The placebo treatment exposure outperforms the active treatment exposure! The possibility of

such an outcome may be one of the reasons why advertising agency executives may be unsupportive of performing true experiments to test the efficacy of alternative advertising treatments. This possibility may be an important antecedent to the meager attention received in the advertising and marketing literature to Seymour Banks (1965) remarkably readable and yet highly technical masterpiece, *Experimentation in Marketing* – used copies of his book are on sale at Amazon.com for \$200 apiece ( June 2010).

### ADDITIONAL SERIOUS FLAWS IN CONVERSION STUDIES FOR COMPARING ALTERNATIVE CAMPAIGNS AND MEDIA VEHICLES PERFORMANCES

Although conversion studies are invalid for learning whether or not advertising causes tourists to visit, they can be useful for comparing the performance of alternative marketing campaigns (Woodside & Motes, 1981) and media (Woodside & Ronkainen, 1982) in generating visitors and revenues and net returns. Such studies ask and answer questions concerning how many inquiries reported visits and estimated expenditures by tourists associate with the money spent on advertising campaign A versus B versus C (see Woodside & Motes, 1981, for such a study). Or, the conversion study may focus on inquiries, visits, and revenues generated through advertising in newspapers versus magazines (see Woodside & Ronkainen, 1982, for such a study). Or, the conversion study might focus on comparing visits, revenues, and net returns for magazines in specific categories (e.g., competing "shelter books") (see Woodside & Soni, 1990, for such a study).

However, in a meta-analysis, Woodside and Dubelaar (2003) provide strong evidence supporting the conclusion that most conversion studies commit two serious mistakes resulting in overestimating performances in such comparisons. First, most conversion studies identify the sponsoring brand by informing sample members that, "You wrote and asked for information about visiting [State, Province, Country X] and we want to know if did visit after receiving the literature you requested."

Making such a statement biases a conversion study in several ways. The respondents are likely to not return the survey if they did not visit following receipt of the requested information. The respondents to a request to complete a survey is likely to report more favorable responses about their visit if they do report a visit – reciprocity dictates favorable replies especially

when respondents receive a package containing valuable free stuff [visitor's information guide (VIG), maps, and special offers]. Also, some respondents are more likely to report completing a trip after receiving the literature requested while they actually are responding about trips completed in years prior to asking for the literature.

Woodside and Dubelaar (2003) report the average conversion rate to be 47 percent in conversion studies that identify the destination brand sponsoring the study versus 36 percent among studies that do not identify the sponsoring destination brand. This finding supports the argument that identifying the brand sponsoring the study builds in a positive bias in responses.

Asking about consumption visits to four to seven competing destination brands reduces brand sponsor-identity bias and has the additional benefit of learning inquirers' behaviors (inquiries and visits) to competing and complementary destination brands. Woodside and Soni (1988, 1990) provide details of such a study. Also, asking about visiting several versus only one destination brand increases the likelihood that sampled inquirers visited one or more of the destination brands; thus interest in returning a completed survey increases. Woodside and Dubelaar (2003) find that response rates improve when surveys eliminate brand sponsor-identity bias; they report that the average response rates are 49 versus 59 percent with versus without sponsor-identity bias.

### QUASI AND TRUE EXPERIMENTS USEFUL FOR MEASURING THE IMPACTS OF ADVERTISING AND MARKETING PROGRAMS

Campbell (1969) provides a brilliant treatise on quasi-experiments that includes several graphs representing the findings representative of different quasi-experimental designs. His discussion includes explanation of the "control series design" as a quasi-experimental design. In a control series design, measures of performance are made for several time periods before, during, and following the introduction of a new program for both the brand introducing the new program and control brands. Campbell and Ross (1968) show the impact of traffic fatalities of Connecticut's introduction of highway speeding crackdown in 1955 versus the absence of such a crackdown in four neighboring states to illustrate. Owing to history and maturation (sources of invalidity), all five states experienced decreases in

traffic fatalities during 1956–1959, but the decline was much greater for Connecticut than the average of the other four states. "Impressed particularly by the 1957, 1958, and 1959 trend, we are willing to conclude that the crackdown had some effect, over and above the undeniable pseudo-effects of regression (Campbell & Ross, 1968)" (Campbell, 1969).

The Australian Tourism Commission's advertising 1984–1990 with Paul Hogan as a spokesperson inviting Americans to visit and "I'll slip an extra shrimp on the barbie for you" is viewable as a control series design – an example of a quasi-experiment design. Australia has never achieved the inquiry and visitation rates (adjusted for maturity effects) before or since the six years of advertising with Hogan as the country's spokesperson. Neighboring countries (New Zealand, Singapore, and Indonesia) did not experience similar jumps in these two impact factors.

Baker and Bendel (2005) provide supporting evidence of this campaign's positive influence, "Before the campaign, Australia was approximately number 78 on the 'most desired' vacation destination list for Americans, but became number 7 three months after the launch, and soon became number 1 or 2 on American's 'dream vacation' list, remaining in that position for most of the next two decades." Fig. 1 illustrates what the findings look like for such a control series design.

Consider a second quasi-experiment in tourism marketing evaluation. Fig. 2 shows the results of a quasi-experiment testing the efficacy of a free 130-page VIG offered each year to persons responding to Prince Edward Island's (PEI) tourism advertising. This research involved a large-scale, face-to-face, interview study with interview data collected at all PEI exit points – at the time of the study PEI had no "fixed link" (Canadian speak for bridge) and 93 percent of visitors existed by ferries and interviews were held on these ferries (see details see Woodside et al., 1997). A copy of the VIG was shown to respondents, and they were asked whether they had seen a copy before or during their visits. This design permits calculating total visit expenditures (adding up reports of accommodations, meals, activities, and travel reported expenses) for visitors with and without experiencing the VIG. The findings in Table 1 and Fig. 1 show substantially higher average total expenditures in PEI by both first-time and repeat visitors having versus not having the VIG.

Woodside et al. (1997) give estimates for the annual financial outcomes for PEI of having the VIG in PEI's tourism marketing program. The study provides evidence that responds to the continuing debate raging now in DMOs in U.S. and Canadian Provinces about whether or not paper copies of VIGs are too expensive to offer to inquirers. Should the DMO only provide an online "magazine" to inquirers? Should the DMO require a

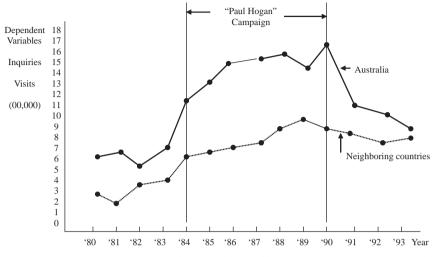


Fig. 1. Control Series Design of Advertising Effects on Tourist's Inquiries and Visits. Note: Fig. 1 shows a pattern of finding confirming a successful advertising strategy using a control-series quasi-experiment and not the specific findings in the Australian TV American advertising campaign for 1984–1990.

payment for a paper version of the VIG? Related questions to these VIG issues include whether or not bookings to events and for accommodations should be possible at the VIG internet site or should links only appear for such purchases.

A true-experiment design includes creating two or more groups of subjects with random assignments of subjects to groups and with one group receiving a placebo treatment and the second receiving an active-ingredient treatment (e.g., the advertising expected to cause substantial increases in inquiries, visits, and brand destination expenditures by visitors). Table 1 presents the main findings from a large-scale true experiment that included assigning 30,800 Americans randomly into one of four groups (Wilcox & Woodside, 2010). The study was designed to test the impact of offering vacation package deals to Americans to encourage visits to France. Atout France (the French government DMO responsible for promoting tourism to France) sponsored the study.

Notice in Table 1 that the presence of deals demotivates behavioral responses in comparison with the placebo treatment both in opening the email and in opening the FranceGuide.com online magazine (VIG). The net share opening both the email and the VIG marginally increases as the

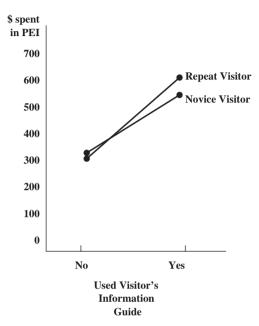


Fig. 2. Average Total Expenditures during Visit to PEI. Source: Data form discussion in Woodside et al. (1997).

**Table 1.** Findings of True Experiment for Atout France American Advertising Campaign 2010.

Advertising Treatment	% Opening (Email Opening)	% Who Opened Email (Opening FranceGuide.com)	Net %
Placebo email	19	24	4.56
2 deals email	18	7	1.26
4 deals email	17	8	1.36
15 deals email	15	12	1.80

Source: Data from discussion in Wilcox and Woodside (2010).

number of deals increases but falls well below the net share opening both in the placebo treatment group. One explanation for these findings is that the deal offers changes in the mental framing of email recipients from a friendto-friend communication to a salesperson-to-customer communication.

Additional studies of another leisure-related industry (home gardening) indicate that focusing advertising on direct-sale offers delivers lower net

returns than using a two-step approach – offering a free catalog from which customers can buy (Neubner & Woodside, 1986). The consumer research literature indicates substantial influences of mental framings on choice behavior (Woodside & Singer, 1994).

The dependent variables in the Wilcox and Woodside (2010) true experiment include behavior responses – pointing and clicking – and do not rely on self-reports by respondents. Given that most thinking occurs unconsciously (Wilson, 2002; Zaltman, 2003), self-reports often are inaccurate, and the proof is in the pudding (behavior), collecting behavioral versus verbal data alone is a substantial advance in advertising and marketing performance metrics.

Unfortunately the true experiment that Wilcox and Woodside (2010) report was not designed to test the impacts of the placebo and treatment emails on hotel and event bookings. Future research needs to include such studies.

# DO DESTINATION MARKETING WEBSITES PROVIDE USEFUL INFORMATION FOR THEIR WEBSITE VISITORS?

A core issue in website advertising and marketing programs includes the three principal questions in the beginning of this chapter. The issues focus on whether or not website marketing delivers visitors and revenues net of expenses. Possibly secondary but still relevant issues are whether or not tourism websites actually contain or are perceived to contain information useful about destinations.

Woodside and Dion (2010) provide a rubric (set of rules) to measure the actual useful of tourism destination websites. Woodside and Dion use this rubric to examine the information available in the tourism marketing websites promoting visits to four countries: China, Russia, Thailand, and Poland. Their findings indicate that countries are likely to vary substantially in the usefulness of the information that they provide to travelers at websites.

A study of city tourism websites (offered by Genoa, Marseilles, and Valencia DMOs) by Fryc (2010) confirms this view for city websites as well. Valencia's tourism website outperforms the other two cities' tourism websites in providing useful information in Fryc's study.

Do tourism websites actually containing more versus less usefulness information receive more use by travelers and deliver more visits to a brand destination? This issue might be the topic of future research.

### BOLDLY PREDICTING THE NEAR-FUTURE FOR DESIGNING EFFECTIVE TOURISM ADVERTISING AND MARKETING PROGRAMS

The teen years in the 21st century will bear witness to the adoption of true experiments for measuring the performance of tourism advertising and marketing programs. Advancing technologies in internet marketing will transform research relying on self-report to real-life behavior-dependent variables. Equivalent advances in tourism performance metrics are happening now that will match Gerald Eskin's (1973, 1985) accomplishments in introducing true experiments (through "single source data") of sales of frequently purchased consumer goods in supermarkets.

Coupling technological advances with theory eventually drives out ignorance of ignorance. Galileo's use of the telescope was a big boost in finally ending the widespread belief in Europe that the Sun revolves around the Earth. Internet marketing will come of age before 2020. Applications of the use of true experiments using Internet marketing platforms are doing for tourism marketing what Galileo did for astronomy.

### DMO EXECUTIVES AND SCHOLARS WORKING TOGETHER

Articles appearing in the leading tourism and hospitality journals bear witness to the lack of relationships now existing between DMO executives and tourism scholars. Where are the articles having joint authors representing industry and academia?

Do not expect many joint industry-academic reports to start appearing during the 21st century teen years. However, the evidence from Galileo to Eskin indicates that a series of studies by one or small groups of individuals eventually causes big impacts on how things get measured.

What does appear likely is that hospitality CEOs and state/province legislators will continue to demand hard evidence that tourism advertising delivers visitors, expenditures by visitors, and profits for the investments made. The good news is that DMOs are finally able to deliver such evidence.

The big mistake by DMOs is still likely to be ignorance of ignorance – not knowing what you do not know about what-to-measure and how-to-measure it. The January 2009 "Management and Financial Audit of Hawaii

Tourism Authority's Major Contracts" vividly demonstrates the impact of failure of not knowing by a DMO.

We found the HTA's [Hawaii Tourism Authority – the State of Hawaii's government office managing government tourism marketing programs] role as the lead entity and advocate of the tourism industry is significantly weakened by its inability to provide measurable results for its major marketing contractors.... Essentially, the authority [HTA] relies on the contractors to set up their own contract terms, deliverables, and even the means by which performance will be evaluated. Lacking objective measures, benchmarks, and documentation, the authority is unable to demonstrate the effectiveness of its oversight process. In previous reports, we raised the issue of the need for HTA to develop measures that could demonstrate the effectiveness of its activities and programs. Industry experts attest to the complexity and difficulty in assessing the effectiveness of tourism development efforts such as promoting brand awareness. But absent objectively determined results, the effectiveness of taxpayer funds spent on promoting Hawaii's most important industry cannot be demonstrated. (The Auditor, 2009, pp. ii–iii)

Strong words! But similar strong words appearing in prior Hawaii tourism audit reports brought about few changes in Hawaii's measurement of its tourism advertising and marketing programs (Woodside & Sakai, 2009). Hopefully the review here will be useful for the Hawaii Tourism Authority and additional DMOs to begin to apply scientific methods now available for valid and reliable advertising and marketing performance measurement.

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