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Examining the Use of RV Travel Forums for Campground Searches

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Introduction

Tourism and travel literature is replete with studies on lodging. For the traditional traveler, lodging choices range from basic room accommodations to luxury suites, from motels to lavish 5-star resorts. A demographic of the industry garnering little academic attention is the recreational vehicle (RV) traveler. The RV traveler actually has two decisions to make with regards to their lodging; their recreational vehicle and their campground selection. Campgrounds, like their "lodging" counterparts for the traditional traveler, typically serve the RV traveler as either a destination or as a safe resting point along a travel route. Campground search is the focus of the present study.

Travel planning research has historically centered on the traditional traveler. Many travelers, including the RV traveler, use the Internet in trip planning. For instance, Wilgen (2009) reports 66% of US leisure travelers used the Internet to plan their 2009 travel as compared to 35% in 2000. Pan and Fesenmaier (2006) notes the Internet as an effective means for tourists seeking travel-related information. Research to date has not studied RV online travel forums as a contribution to the travel and tourism literature. Thus, the aim of the present study is to explore how RV travelers use online travel forums in their campground search. The identification of such variables will assist campground owners and operators in their marketing strategies and competitive positioning while improving the overall experience for the RV traveler at their chosen campground and destination. The article begins with a brief overview of the RV industry, including the evolution of both the recreational vehicle and campground. Associations related to the RV industry are also profiled. Associations support the businesses respective to the RV industry. Associations also support the consumers of the industry, offering varied services and networking platforms. A literature review in travel planning, online information resources, and campground research follows, providing a conceptual basis of the present study. The methodology and research design is outlined next, followed by the summaries, discussion, and implications respective to the use of RV travel forums for campground searches.

The RV industry dates back to 1910. The recreational vehicle was often identified as a "house car" and travelers were labeled "tin can" tourists (RV Hall of Fame, 2010). The passage of time has allowed the RV, the campground, and the RV lifestyle to evolve. Today's RV industry is a 37.5 billion dollar industry with approximately 8.2 million households owning an RV (RVIA, 2010). RV parks and campgrounds nationwide report 2010 reservations have increased by 5-10% over the same period in 2009, despite the economic recession (RVIA, 2010). The recreational vehicle, specifically, has incurred tremendous change in its 100 years of existence. The present day RV has lengths up to 45 feet, has heights matching that of tractor trailers, and has features equal to or more extravagant than found in conventional homes. The campground, likewise, has also changed significantly over the past 100 years. Campgrounds were often a sectioned off piece of farmland, providing at best, water and electricity. Today, there are over 16,000 RV accessible campgrounds nationwide (GoRVing, 2010). Some campgrounds have remained remote and primitive while others are luxurious gated communities. The RV lifestyle, consequently, is also quite diverse. With so many campgrounds and recreational vehicles to choose from, travelers freely select their destination and projected travel experience. Some choose nearby destinations while others prefer long distance travel. Some prefer one night away while others become full timers, often selling their traditional home.

Associations, as with any industry, offer a wide array of services and benefits for their respective memberships. The RV industry provides membership associations of varying types to a wide array of stakeholders and consumers. Important to note, the significance of including RV associations in the overview is to provide their contribution and support to RV related businesses and RV consumers. For example, select associations offer business to business resources. The National RV Dealers Association (RVDA) is dedicated to advancing the RV retailers' best interests through education, member services, industry leadership, and market expansion programs that promote growth in the industry and enhancement of the RV experience (RVDA, 2010). The Recreational Vehicle Industry Association (RVIA) is the national trade association representing recreational vehicle manufacturers and their respective parts suppliers (RVIA, 2010). At a state level, as examples, the Florida RV Trade Association (FRVTA) focuses on media relations, promotional tools, and promotional programs for its membership while the Michigan Association of Recreational Vehicles and Campgrounds (MARVAC) represents the manufactured housing, recreational vehicle, and private campground industries in the state of Michigan. MARVAC works to improve the business climate for its members and to encourage growth in the recreation vehicle and private campground industries while contributing to the quality of Michigan tourism through legislation, education, marketing and public awareness (MARVAC, 2010). The Resort and Commercial Recreation Association (RCRA) represents recreation and amenity managers in resorts, hotels, sports clubs, campgrounds, theme parks, special event companies, cruise lines, community developments, and colleges/universities (RCRA, 2010). Specific to the current study, there are a number of associations offering business to consumer resources and consumer to consumer support services. For example, the Family Motor Coach Association (FMCA) members receive fellowship, information exchange, social activities, social networking, industry discounts, and trip planning as membership benefits (FMCA, 2010). The Good Sam Club offers benefits ranging from industry discounts, trade publications, technical advice, RV insurance, roadside assistance, social networking, and trip planning (Good Sam Club, 2010).

Literature Review

Relevant literature of travel planning, online information resources, and campground studies provide the foundation for the present study. The literature is replete with studies related to travel planning. Howard (1963) is an early pioneer of "choice sets". "Choice sets" is a process of analyzing and reducing options of future travel (Petrick, Li, & Park, 2007). Such research is relevant to the current study since RV travelers have over 16,000 campgrounds to choose from nationally. The RV traveler, assumedly, must somehow reduce their options to a more manageable number as they endure the campground search process. Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) decision making model has also received considerable attention as an early adopter model for consumer behavior research. In addition, Pizam, Neumann, and Reichel (1979) notes travel motivation result from predisposed needs toward a tourist activity. Consequently, the concept of push and pull motivators has become central to travel related studies. For instance, studies have found individuals are pushed by variables to travel and pulled by the particular destination (Crompton, 1979; Jang & Cai, 2002; Klenosky, 2002; Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). Crompton and Ankomah (1993) claim the magnitude of a travel search is directly correlated to the perceived levels of risk of the proposed destination. Pan and Fesenmaier (2001) add interest and location as dominant tourist destination search motivators. Guorsoy and McCleary (2004) include familiarity and knowledge of a particular destination as significant contributors to the travel destination search process. The present study compliments the previous travel planning

literature by identifying emerging categories and themes as related to the RV traveler's campground search process.

The expansiveness of the Internet has broadened travel search opportunities and travel research agendas. The Internet is often utilized as a resource to explore future travel sites. As Shanka and Taylor (2003) notes, consumers often search destinations, accommodations, and attractions during their Internet search, relying heavily on individual's online reviews over a company's website claim (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Kwak, Fox, & Zinkhan, 2002). The Internet also provides a communication platform for consumers to share experiences and insights of their travels, anonymously and/or by name disclosure, through forums, chat rooms, and blogs. Individual postings are often referred to as word-of-mouth communication.

Word-of-mouth is defined as oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator (Buttle, 1998). Consumers offer and receive advice from friends, relatives, co-workers, and even total strangers worldwide regarding purchase decisions and destination choice through word-of-mouth postings (Crotts, 1999; Pan, McLaurin, & Crotts, 2007). Gelb and Sundaram (2002) highlight forums and chat rooms as great communication vehicles for sharing consumer opinions. Blogs are also common communication channels used for and by consumers in information sharing. By definition, Chow (2005) describes blogs as a shortened word for "web log" (Pan, McLaurin, & Crotts, 2007, p. 36). Baker and Green (2005) further depict the popularity of blogs as an explosive outbreak of information (Crotts, Mason, & Davis, 2009, p. 141) and credible (Mack, Blose, and Pan, 2008). Furthermore, Pan, MacLaurin, and Crotts (2007) claim blog analysis can be useful in detecting strengths and weaknesses of a tourist destination (p. 44). Thus, in a sense, consumers have broadened their role in travel searches. Tourists have actually become a media source in the travel industry (Thevenot, 2007).

The term social media has become commonplace when associated with online communications. Social media websites, according to Pan, McLaurin, and Crotts (2007), include blogs, virtual communities, social networks, and YouTube to name a few. All may be used for present day travel searches. According to Xiang and Gretzel (2010), social media websites offer assistance to consumers in sharing travel-related experiences, opinions, and comments, becoming information sources for others. Blackshaw (2006) contends social media carries relevant and easily accessed travel information for impressionable consumers. Blackshaw and Nazzarro (2006), however, claim social media content consists of facts, opinions, experiences, and rumors.

The actual online community has also been a focus of research agendas. Online communities, as with any forum, blog, or narrative, allow for communication to take place anytime, anyplace, about anyone and with anyone. Online communities often share and engage in interpersonal influence (Senacal & Nantel, 2004). Interpersonal influence is important when addressing hospitality products and services that cannot be judged prior to consumption (Lewis and Chambers, 2000). Westbrook (1987) claims consumers searched for word-of-mouth platforms to release feelings developed from past experiences. Research has even studied how online communities sustain themselves. Butler (2001) claims participants in online communities must receive some type of benefit in order to continue their participation, thus supporting their community. Arguello et. al. (2006) argue that participation in online communities is influenced by receiving a response to a post. Ridings and Gefen (2004) notes friendship as a strong motivator for participation and interest in online communities while Frenzen and Davis (1990) add closeness, intimacy, support, and association. Levine and Moreland (1994) declares online membership will most likely stay intact if social, instrumental, and emotional needs are

addressed. Brown and Reingen (1987) claim "ties" with one another leads to more interaction, greater frequency, and more information volume throughout the communication channels. Bansal and Voyer (2000) contend the greater the tie, the greater the influence in the message. The present study expanded upon the present literature by examining the use of member-based and public-based online RV travel forums.

Of critical significance is the scarcity of studies related to campground research, thus giving credence to the present study's focus on the RV traveler and campground searches. Early adopters of "vehicle-based camping" note recreational involvement, tourism strategies, camper satisfaction, and involvement motivators. Guinn (1980) studies elderly recreational vehicle tourists and their motivations for leisure travel. Henderson and Cooper (1983) study recreation involvement of vehicle-based campers. Hammitt and Strohmeier (1983) study campers' preferences in public, private, and state owned campgrounds. Ronkinen and Woodside (1984) study campground tourism strategy and market share while Connelly (1987) identifies solitude, nature, and facility characteristics as three factors critical to camper satisfaction. McIntyre (1989) identifies attraction, self expression, and centrality as three components of involvement into vehicle-based camper lifestyles. McIntyre and Pigram (1992) reports dimensions of high centrality, familiarity, and prior experiences as major variables for participation.

In summary, it can be concluded from the literature review that research opportunities in the RV industry are plentiful. The studies highlighted offer a snapshot of potential research agendas for the RV industry while providing a foundation for the current study. The literature review provides insight to consumer behavior, online communities, and the significance of word-of-mouth communications. The major beneficiary for the present study will be the campground owner/operator. Campground owners/operators assumedly have tremendous competition in securing their RV traveler market share, especially given the recent economic downturn. Understanding how RV travelers utilize RV travel forums during campground searches, including the identification of major influences within the postings, should assist and/or guide future marketing strategies and operations of their respective properties.

Methodology and Research Design

The purpose of the present study is to explore how RV travelers use online travel forums in their campground search. The research design of gathering data from online platforms is selected with basis on previous studies with similar purpose. For example, Pan, MacLaurin, and Crotts (2007) gains insight into the meaning of online travel blogs and their relationship to one specific tourist destination. Data is extracted directly from online blogs. Crotts, Mason, and Davis (2009), likewise, explore guest satisfaction in the hospitality and tourism industry by transferring and analyzing travel blog narratives on public online forums. In the current study, a Google search is conducted to determine how many online RV travel forums are available for posting campground experiences. Two categories of RV online travel forums are identified; member-based and public access. Member forums require password access given to members of the respective RV travel association. Public forums are open to every traveler, the RVer and non-RV traveler. The search reveals three member-based travel forums and four public access travel forums. Unfortunately, the researchers are unsuccessful in attaining permission to access one of the member-based travel forums. Thus, the remaining two membership travel forums detected are utilized for the present study. A further review of the four public-based travel forums reveals two of the four are actually the same forum but are under a different heading and are available through different websites. Thus, the two public-based travel forums identified are utilized for the present study.

The present study follows a qualitative and quantitative design. The data analysis resembles a previous study with similar purpose. Pan, McLaurin, and Crotts (2007) performs content analysis to better understand travel blogs as a manifestation of individual travel experiences and to better understand the experience communicated. For the present study, content analysis of the data is performed manually instead of utilizing software. Critics may question why manual analysis is selected over software. Language on the postings is used interchangeably to describe two different RV campground features or processes. Software may or may not be able to distinguish such difference. For example, an RV traveler may refer to a dump station at a campground. Without understanding the context, the software may extract "dump" where traditional meaning commonly refers to a trash pick-up area. In the RV world, this particular feature references a convenience for disposing holding tank contents. Understanding the entire context of the posting will determine if the experience is positive or negative for the RV traveler. Thus, manual content analysis is performed following a four step procedure often noted as "thick description analysis". Denzin (1989) describes thick description analysis as establishing significance of an experience or sequence of events for the person in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard (p. 83).

Each online travel forum contains multiple sub headings categorizing the postings; i.e. campgrounds, destinations, full-timer issues, maintenance and upkeep, and technology to name a few. The present study explores how RV travelers utilize online travel forums in their campground search. Therefore, "campgrounds" and "destination" sub headings are selected for use in the present study.

The following procedure is implemented for data collecting. First, the actual text from the posting and the respective number of "views" from the four RV travel forums are transferred to four separate word documents for analysis. The unit of analysis for the present study is postings over a 6 month period between March and August, 2010. A total of 252 posts are transferred. Next, two researchers independently reviewed the postings and individually identified categories and themes from the postings. The categories depicted by each researcher are compared. A final list of categories is then determined. Next, the researchers reviewed the patterns and themes identified by each category. A total of three categories are identified from both the member and public online travel forum postings. The list of themes are comparable for both forum types. Table 1 depicts the categories, themes, # of posts, and # of views for each online travel forum. Table 2 displays postings from the member forums respective to each category and theme. Table 3 displays postings from the public forums respective to each category and theme. Important to note is the consistency between the two researchers during the identification of categories and themes. According to Kassarjain (1977), interjudge reliability is the percentage of agreement between several judges viewing the same material. Consistency is determined by calculating the interjudge reliability percent determined by the number of similar categories and themes as compared to the comprehensive list by both researchers. The composite score is .909. Kassarjain (1977) declares a composite score above .85 as acceptable, indicating an appropriate reliability. Additionally, the researchers determine the unit of analysis provides sufficient depth in the data collection process. The researchers came to such conclusion when the point of redundancy of emerging patterns is reached in the present study.

Table 1: RV Travel Forum Summaries

MEMBER FORUMS

Category	*Theme*	*# of Posts*	*# of Views (%)*
Inquiry			
	Destination	58 (46%)	51,897 (50%)
	Misc	16 (13%)	24,017 (24%)
	Campground	14 (11%)	7,292 (7%)
	Route	10 (8%)	2.093 (2%)
FYI			
	Campground	16 (13%)	12,413 (12%)
	Misc	4 (3%)	3,448 (3%)
Service			
	Campground	7 (6%)	2,435 (2%)

PUBLIC FORUMS			
Category	*Theme*	*# of Posts*	*# of Views (%)*
Inquiry			
	Destination	76 (60%)	15,715 (61%)
	Campground	20 (16%)	2,900 (11%)
	Misc	13 (11%)	3,385 (13%)
FYI			
	Campground	9 (7%)	2,015 (9%)
	Destination	4 (3%)	461 (2%)
	Misc	3 (2%)	766 (3%)
Service			
	Campground	2 (2%)	373 (1%)

Table 2: Member Forum Postings

Category	**Theme**	**Postings**
Inquiry	Destination	**-**I have a 40 ft MH heading to Minnesota for one week. Any recommendations on things to do or places to go? -Which is better, St. Augustine or Daytona Beach? -I am going to Arizona for a month next winter. Phoenix or Tucson? -We have 4 children and want to go to Myrtle Beach. Any kid-friendly activities you would recommend? -We have a 45 foot MH. We want to go to the Grand Canyon. Any advice would be appreciated regarding campgrounds, routes, nearby attractions that are a must see.
Inquiry	Campground	-Has anyone stayed at Theodore Roosevelt National Park? -Is Pleasant Lake Resort in Florida kid-friendly? -Any recommendations for campgrounds in south Ft. Meyers? -Looking for a campground on the beach in Florida -Looking for a campground on I-80 in Pennsylvania.
Inquiry	Route	-Traveling on Interstate 35 in the Midwest. Any side trips we should take? -We are traveling I-80 east out of Chicago. Any route recommendations other than the interstate? I have heard there is a lot of construction. -What is the best road atlas for RVers?
Inquiry	Miscellaneous	-Is their security at the Casino Queen campground in St. Louis? -What are your experiences with camping clubs?

		-What safety issues have you experienced in RV parks? -Does the Flying J truck plazas charge for dumping holding tanks now? -Has anyone taken tours in NYC while traveling by RV? Is so, what tours do you recommend and where did you stay? -I have heard a lot about military campgrounds. Do you have to be active or retired military to camp there? -I am not into social networking. Please help me understand the hype.
FYI	Campground	-Be sure to check out the new rules for the NY State Park Pass -I am staying at the KOA south of Louisville. If you are here too, please stop by. -I just camped in Ocala, Florida. Easy access to I-75, gas, and Walmart. -There is a great 5-star resort in Dillard, GA
FYI	Miscellaneous	-There is a detour in the Upper Peninsula. -Contact me if you are headed that way. -There is deer and other wildlife all around Camp Tonker
Service	Campground	-The staff at the KOA in Valdosta was very helpful. -Terrible experience at a small campground in North Carolina. No property manager, office closed early, no security. -Must have been a new check in staff member at a campground in Florida. Everyone needs to be trained, just don't forget to have the trainer available for questions.

Table 3: Public Forum Postings

Category	**Theme**	**Postings**
Inquiry	Destination	-Searching for flea markets in Indiana. Any recommendations? -Myrtle Beach or Florida Panhandle?
Inquiry	Campground	-Has anyone stayed on the premium sites at Fort Wilderness? -We have a 32 foot MH and will have a tent. Is there an extra charge for the tent at KOA's?
Inquiry	Miscellaneous	-What route is best through the Blue Ridge Mountains? -Anyone have trouble burning a campfire? -What is dry camping? -Do you run your generator air conditioning while traveling or just the dash air? Or both?
FYI	Campground	-Stayed at a gated community near Sleeping Bear Dunes. -We had items taken from our campsite. Please be cautious.
FYI	Destination	-Went to Yosemite last month. Planning on returning and may inquire about workamping. -FDR National Park is a must stay. The area is gorgeous and the historic tours are well worth your time.
FYI	Miscellaneous	-Tons of things to do at Stone Mtn Campground in Georgia. -If you are in the Elkhart, Indiana area, take time to tour the RV Hall of Fame Museum. Give yourself a minimum of 2 hours.
Service	Campground	-Bad experience near Ashville. Email me for the details. -If you have a big rig, stay away from campgrounds near Yellowstone. Not big rig friendly. Just wish we were told when we made the reservation.

Results and Discussion

A total of 252 postings are analyzed for the present study. More specifically, 125 postings are reviewed from the member forums and 127 postings are reviewed from the public forums. The postings from each forum are categorized and themed according to content and by number of respective views. The findings are presented by themes with specific reference to the major categories of inquiry,

for your information, and service. The four major themes in the current study are destinations, campgrounds, miscellaneous, and routes, respectively.

Destinations

Destination-based inquiries are most prevalent in the member and public forums. This is not surprising as there are boundless destination choices for the RV traveler. However, some disparity between the forum types has been identified with regards to context. For example, postings in the member forums often provide more detail when posting their destination inquiry, i.e. identifying their recreational vehicle length, destination attributes, travel party demographics. An example of a destination inquiry in a member forum: "I have a 42 foot motor home with 4 slides. We are headed to West Virginia and are seeking a more wooded campground but are concerned with site length and maneuverability in and around the campground. Any suggestions? We are headed that direction for the fall colors but are flexible based on roadways and ease of access." Another member forum posting has a similar inquiry with special interest to a particular community as a destination. "We will be traveling to the Elkhart, Indiana area and are seeking a nice campground with full hook ups and cable TV. We are towing so are flexible with any recommendation. We have a 40 foot motor home. Any previous experiences regarding day trips, campgrounds, attractions, or factory tour experience would be appreciated". Conversely, travelers in the public forums rarely provide such details, instead, post inquiries about a destination or attraction. For example, one RV traveler was heading towards Graceland and did not have a specific campground selected. The posting states: "Has anyone traveled to Graceland lately? I'm heading there in July. How RV friendly is the area?"

Interestingly, a substantial difference is found between the forum types regarding FYI destination-related postings. RV travelers did not submit any FYI destination experience posts in the member forums, however, FYI destination experiences are in the public forums. As an example, unsolicited postings in the public forums include experiences of factory tours and references to the beauty of northern Michigan. An example of factory tours as a destination: "If you are in the market for an RV or just want a fabulous experience, check out the RV factory tours across the country. I have visited over half of them and plan on continuing with my education. In addition, many of the factories offering tours have onsite camping or camping nearby." And an example regarding northern Michigan as a destination: "Michigan is a great RV destination. There are so many places to see. Spend time in the UP. The Munising area is absolutely gorgeous and summer daylight extends well after 10pm".

Campgrounds

Campground-related postings are the second most prevalent theme revealed in both forum types. Campgrounds vary in amenities, layout, price, and accessibility. As outlined previously, campgrounds are the counterpart to the traditional traveler's hotel, motel, or resort. Many traditional lodging options are part of a corporate chain, thus, consistency with amenities, layout, and price are common and expected. Campgrounds are, traditionally, unique from one another even though some are franchise properties offering a level of consistency. It may very well be the uniqueness between campgrounds that instigates the inquiries. Campground inquiries are similar in scope between the member and public forums, with a few exceptions. Campground postings in the member forums, for example, range from basic information inquiries to personal experiences. One traveler, for example, is interested in staying at a specific gated RV resort but is concerned about the advertised high price. The traveler is questioning the campground's overall value due to the high price. Another traveler has interest in camping opportunities at a specific RV manufacturer's plant. Findings reveal campground-related postings in the public

forums are generic inquiries in context and are often related to policies. For example, one posting requests information about RV length restrictions at state and national parks.

Findings, as discussed previously, reveal two notable differences regarding campground-based inquiries. Ownership communities and military campground inquiries are only found on member forums. To expand further, ownership communities are becoming a popular campground option for RV travelers. Some communities, however, have restrictions specific to the age of the RV and the type of RV one owns. These are unique policies not often found outside ownership-based campgrounds. Military-based postings are also exclusively found in the member forums. RV travelers are seeking proximity of military campgrounds to military bases and are inquiring about access restrictions if not active military. Conversely, casino-based inquiries are only found in the public forums. Casino camping has become an attractive alternative to traditional camping. Casino campground features vary, some with full hookups, some with limited hookups, and some open exclusively to patrons of the neighboring casino. Some casino campgrounds are literally in the parking lot of the casino while others are an adjoining property to the casino.

Numerous campground-related postings in the current study offer FYI comments. These postings are unsolicited from travelers and are evident in both forums. RV travel often results in unique experiences. Travelers want to share their experiences with others, regardless of forum type. Findings reveal FYI postings are similar in context between the forum types. For example, a traveler in a member forum wanted to share his/her great experience at a campground near a major RV factory due to its minimal fee and unusual policy; $15 a night, electric only, and pay as you go with no reservations. A traveler, likewise, posted a unique camping experience in the public forum. The experience involves camping on a sea wall with a very expensive nightly rate with no other amenities except for the ocean.

Findings also reveal service-related postings. Travelers posted similar experiences in both the member and public forums. Unfortunately, however, the majority of services are of poor encounters. For example, a traveler reflects on campsite dissatisfaction in the member forums. The hookups were not in proper working order. In the public forums, similarly, a RV traveler describes a maintenance issue, but in this case, is accommodated for the inconvenience. Limited positive experiences are shared in the service related postings. One exception in the member forums is a traveler praising the staff's warm welcoming and constant attention to detail. A public forum posting references the escort by a staff member from check in to campsite. They also note that the staff member did not return to the office until their satisfaction of the assigned campsite was verified.

Miscellaneous

Miscellaneous-themed postings are slightly more prevalent in the member forums than in the public forums. There are so many experiences in the RV lifestyle to learn from that it appears RV travelers in member forums want to share their personal experiences with their fellow travelers. The following is a snapshot of miscellaneous postings. The state and national park systems are popular destinations. An RV traveler may not know to ask if the park is full or if they are turned away due to their length. Travelers may also not know that reservations should be secured months in advance for state and national parks. For example, "State parks are great but it appears that many do not accommodate the larger rigs. Verify that your RV length can be accommodated". Another experience regards the logistics of parking an RV. Trip planning often times depend on the practicality and the ability of parking the recreational vehicle. For example, one traveler is interested in a popular tourist destination but is concerned about the size

of their recreational vehicle and subsequent parking availability. Miscellaneous postings also include inquiries about RV tour companies and memberships in other RV clubs. Regarding the latter, membership clubs have a strong presence in the RV lifestyle. Membership clubs often charge an annual fee that affords the member discounted rates at participating campgrounds. One traveler notes the value of membership in a franchise-based camping club. More specifically, the traveler is seeking the breakeven point of the cost to join versus their future expenditures and fees. Each membership club offers varying benefits and restrictions. Thus, seeking recommendations or experiences in membership clubs may offer insight prior to purchase. Miscellaneous postings also reference social networking. Ironically, in this case, the traveler is not involved in all social media outlets available, thus concerned about not receiving the most updated information. "Is there additional information provided on social networking sites that is different than regular websites? I do not have a Facebook account and want to stay as informed as possible.

Miscellaneous-themed postings in the public forums range from general RV issues to technical questions. The following post demonstrates the complexity of RV travel. "Do you run your generator air conditioning while traveling or run just the dashboard air?" This question is common, especially in hot weather conditions. Dashboard air cannot adequately cool an RV due to the enormous length for which it is required to cool. The air conditioner units in RVs, however, have this capability but can only be operated when the generator is running or when plugged into a power source at a campground. The issue may lend itself not only as a comfort issue but also one of safety. Running a generator while in motion is safe, otherwise, the RV would be equipped with a lock on such feature while in motion.

Routes

Interestingly, route inquiries are common in the member forums but are somewhat embedded within other miscellaneous issues in the public forums. Actual route inquiry, however, not differentiate substantially between the forum types. RV travelers have numerous route options in their travel. Some routes, importantly, are more conducive to RV travel than others. The choice of route may be somewhat dictated by the type of RV a traveler has. For instance, a diesel powered RV has abundant power. Power becomes a factor in hilly terrain. Thus, routes may be chosen based on gas versus diesel engines and flat versus hilly routes. Another consideration in route planning is traffic volume. Hitting rush hour traffic in a large city with a recreational vehicle is somewhat challenging. Thus, route decisions may factor in time of day. An example of a route-related posting in the member forums requests a recommendation of a route versus an interstate route with no tolls. Likewise, a posting from the public forums requests the best route near a major city if not passing through during rush hour.

Views

Postings are also analyzed based upon the number of views each theme receives. Findings are by forum and by theme. Specific to member forums, the most frequently viewed posting is a general question regarding luxury RV's. The question states "What is considered a luxury motor home"? This is interesting as it is a matter of opinion and perception, however, a very important view. The second most viewed posting is a posting regarding military campgrounds. In addition, campground inquiries receives substantially less views than the destination and miscellaneous inquiries. One traveler requests information about a campground suitable for a 32 foot motor home and another requests member opinion on two potential campground choices. Lastly, route inquiries are the least viewed posting type. Of those viewed, two lane roads appear to be at issue.

In the public forums, there is a substantially greater number of views on destinations as compared to those regarding campground and miscellaneous themed postings. More specifically, the two most viewed destination-related postings both refer to mountain destinations. The most viewed miscellaneous postings refer to travel resources; i.e. websites and directories. The most popular viewed FYI – campground postings are "make sure to ask if there is a fee for extra vehicles" and sharing about an experience at a new 5-star resort. Lastly, the service posting receiving the most views refers to a poor experience in a state park.

Conclusions

There are limitations to the present study. First, the validity of the postings relies upon the honesty of the RV traveler. Forums represent personal opinions of personal experiences. Previous experiences may influence the context and/or tone in each posting. Critics may question who is actually posting the comments on online forums, especially when the author is portraying a positive or negative service encounter. Issues concerning ethical behavior on online communication platforms would be an interesting study. A second limitation to the current study is the reviewed postings are not randomly selected.

Nevertheless, the present study contributes to the literature in several ways. The current study provides initial evidence examining how RV travelers utilize member-based and public-based online forums. Findings reveal destination inquiries are most prevalent in the member and public forums. This supports previous literature by Pan and Fesenmaier (2001) as they note interest and location as the dominant tourist destination search motivators. Regarding public forums, public forums are open to everyone. There is a great likelihood that future participants in public online travel forums will exhibit a wide spectrum of experiences, spanning from those interested but not yet engaged in RVing to those who are full timers. Keeping that in mind, destination marketers and campground owners/operators should create marketing materials appropriate for all segments, elaborating on property features, amenities, surrounding areas and attractions, parking, and accessibility to and around the campground property.

Second, member forums generate a higher percentage of unsolicited information regarding campground experience and route inquiries as compared to public forums. Members of online communities have a sense of belongingness and trust, thus willing to share experiences with others having like interests. These findings support prior research stressing the importance of ties with one another to support sharing (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Brown & Reingen, 1987) and interpersonal influence (Senacal & Nantel, 2004; Lewis & Chambers, 2000). Creating communication channels while guests are on property may potentially shield issues that ultimately appear in a negative context on online travel forums. In fact, communication appears to be the undertone of the postings.

Third, miscellaneous inquiries are abundant in the present study. A suggestion for campground staff is to become well versed on a wide array of RV related topics in case such knowledge and/or assistance is requested.

Lastly, the current study is a catalyst for future studies in the RV industry. Further research is plentiful. One recommendation is to explore influences to satisfaction as depicted on member-based and public-based online travel forums. A second recommendation is to explore the influence of social media on competitive positioning and how social media is being utilized in the RV industry. A third recommendation is to expand future RV research agendas globally.

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