

Contemporary Financial Challenges for the U.S Travel Agencies In Respect of Their Experience

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Abstract

The problem addressed in the proposed study was that the impact of E-commerce on traditional brick-and-mortar travel agencies has not been thoroughly examined, indicating that the disintermediation will continue to limit the success of these agencies. The current study consisted of an examination of brick-and-mortar travel agents' perceptions regarding the impact of E-commerce on the traditional travel agencies in respect of travel agent experience, to determine if these perceptions vary as a function of years of travel agent experience in the travel industry. In addition, strategies that brick-and-mortar travel agents use to gain a competitive advantage were examined. Quantitative survey data was used to achieve the purposes of this study. The participants in this study were U.S. citizen's traditional travel agent who experiences the E-commerce impact. The results indicated that travel agents with more experience tended to believe that the effect of E-commerce on brick-and-mortar travel agencies was smaller than did travel agents with less experience. Based on these conclusions, it was recommended that travel agents with less experience travel agencies (i.e., those who tended to be more concerned about the effects of E-commerce) should adopt new strategies to mitigate the negative effects of E-commerce.

Keywords: E-commerce, Travel agent, experience, brick-and-mortar, Traditional Travel agencies, Financial

1. Introduction

Today's business environment is changing and technological environments challenge retail travel consultants on the functions they perform in distribution and sale of travel products. Traditional supplier, intermediaries and consumers seeking for information about booking, accommodation, transport, and destination is a process where they had their own role using their specific information system (Henriksson, 2005). Information technology has a significant impact on businesses and consumers (Lewis & Talalayevsky, 2004). Consumers have become possible through the Internet. E-commerce has affected the traditional brick-and-mortar travel agencies. The entire tourism industry structure is changing, the issue is how much of an effect that E-commerce have had on traditional agencies, and if it is to the point of making them obsolete (Werthner & Ricci, 2004). In previous studies regarding the impact of E-commerce mainly focused on disintermediation of brick-and-mortar travel agencies as threat (Marcussen, 2008). The travel agent's perception's regarding the impact of E-commerce on the traditional travel agencies has not been studied adequately.

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2. Problem Background

The growth and popularity of Internet changed the traditional role of travel agencies. According to Walle(1996) and Qulech and Klein (1996), the performing the mix of services made necessary by the Internet, as well as continuing to play critical roles and extract value, have become vital competitive strategies of the modern travel agency. Access to the Internet has reduced the trust of consumers on the services provided by traditional travel agents. According to Travel Industry Association of America (2011), 2,267 million Internet users in the United States went online to collect information or to check prices and book their trips, and check schedules related to travel.

According to Vasudavanand Standing (1999), argue that future risk of traditional travel agents as intermediate between the suppliers and travelers; started when the internet was first introduced. The issue will be possible to avoid traditional travel agents, as they will no longer be necessary needed to co-ordination and organization of travel arrangements. According to Hass (2002), an online presence is one way that travel agents have responded to the challenges and opportunities of the Internet age. Hass studied the travel agent years of experience in existing, and new business, which he found the major risks and opportunity that challenges small, and medium sized business in the travel industry. The traditional business model must be redesign due to the information technology that was introduced (Porter, 2001).

3. Purpose of the Study

The purposes of this quantitative study were to explore brick-and-mortar travel agents' perceptions regarding the impact of E-commerce on the traditional travel agencies in respect of travel agent experience, The results from this study could be used to present remediation approaches and strategies to develop new value propositions which differentiate them against the Internet competition, and helping travel agents to find new market niche to be adopted to gain competitive advantages in the travel industry.

4. Research Questions and Hypotheses

Based on the purpose of this study, one research questions was developed with two hypotheses. The quantitative hypotheses were developed to address the relationships between travel agents' perceptions regarding the impact of E-commerce on brick-and-mortar travel agencies and travel agent years of experience.

RQ: What are perceptions regarding the impact of E-commerce on brick-and-mortar travel agencies in respect of travel agent experience?

The following hypotheses were developed for the research question:

H₀. Travel agents' perceptions regarding the impact of E-commerce on brick-and-mortar travel agencies do not change with the respect to the agent years of experience in the travel agency industry.

H₁. Travel agents' perceptions regarding the impact of E-commerce on brick-and-mortar travel agencies change with the respect to the agent years of experience in the experience in the travel agency industry.

5. Limitations and Delimitations

The first limitation was the total responses from the participants in the survey. Second, this study relied on a self-report instrument that was used; therefore it is possible that the participants could have affected by the wording of the survey and misread and not provided accurately responses. The first delimitation, this study is conducted via marketing research firm online survey, delimited traditional travel agents with Internet access for completing the questionnaire online. Second, the population of interest in this study consists of travel agents employed at brick-and-mortar travel agencies in the United States. Therefore, the results can be only applied to the population of traditional travel agent in the United States. Further studies in other countries could be conducted to make a comparison. Third, this study is based on the perceptions' of traditional travel agents, and view point of online travel agents has not been considered and explore. However, this study is will to help understand the major issues regarding E-commerce in travel industry.

6. Importance of the Study

Tourism is an important sector of the world's economy, it creates jobs, and generate wealth, and crucial to a sustainable growth and development. It is one of those industries that are able to gain huge effects from use of the information technology.

According to Zhou (2004), travel agents have never seen such a major challenge to their survival, and challenges are coming from a variety of sources: (a) carriers put considerable pressure on travel agents, (b) online booking and the commission cut and cap has increased by travel suppliers; and (c) third-party online travel stores are competing with tradition travel agents and taking customers away. In some other industries, they still hold onto the traditional way things have been done, but in the travel industry the structure of the travel industry and the way business is conducted is changing. Customers seem to accept E-commerce and becoming their own travel agents, organizing their trips themselves and building their own leisure trips. The use of the Internet has become a crucial competitive factor for travel and tourism organizations. As a result the intermediate role of traditional travel agencies between tourism suppliers and consumer is threatened. For traditional travel agent or agencies to benefits from E-commerce while also running brick-and-mortar store has become the important issue for them to survive in the travel industry.

7. Literature review

7.1 Changing Role of Travel Agency

Traditional travel agency has experienced a change over the past years as a result of a reduction in their income. Most airlines launched an online booking engine; to target customers to book their tickets directly from their website. The airline control the inventory on their flights which there is always a better deal, and available seats when buying from their sites. By using this market strategy the airline have significantly cut cost.

In the airline industry, online travel reservations is growing faster than other industries of electronic commerce, and many travelers are searching and planning their trips through Internet. Launching of online flight booking is a serious threat to traditional travel agents as middlemen (Ancker, 2003). According to Licata et al. (2001), both leisure and business travelers are changing their buying habit toward the online booking. There is an important change in distribution chain. These changes occurred in 2002, when major U.S. airlines disclosed net operating losses of almost \$10 billion; approximately \$7.3 billion of these losses were accrued on tickets distribution tickets to consumers. The airline paid millions of dollars in total distribution expense due to booking fee to global distribution systems (GDS). This high cost caused U.S. airlines to establish their own websites using advanced technology enabling consumers to search for different flights schedules, and fares and to purchase tickets directly through airlines websites (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). This action was adding significant costs to the value chain and profits redistribution to the benefit of online travel agencies at expense of traditional travel agencies (Ancker, 2003).

7.2 The Internet and the Travel Industry

The travel industry focused on the travel agency sales channel. Customers used to visit their local traditional travel agencies, and purchase travel tickets or get vacation information through the agencies. The birth of the E-commerce has caused this to change. Customers discovered that they can search their desired travel places and purchase airline, cruise, and train, ticket online. When customers realize how easy it is to use the Internet for travel arrangements, it's hard to justify using traditional agency (Aaron, 2006). Traditional travel agencies are worried to enter the E-business market place, due to the high cost of implantation, lack of training, and zero commission from the airlines. It seems that the traditional travel agencies have a difficulty to challenge airlines and the online travel agencies

According to Aaron (2006), corporate travel that has big accounts had the power to negotiate the price with the airlines. For small traditional travel agencies who did not have big accounts with the airlines; had to change their business model. They start offering different types of packages, adventure packages, family packages, medical packages, senior citizen packages, and holiday packages. Travel agencies that adapt to E-commerce provided all kind of services locally and globally.

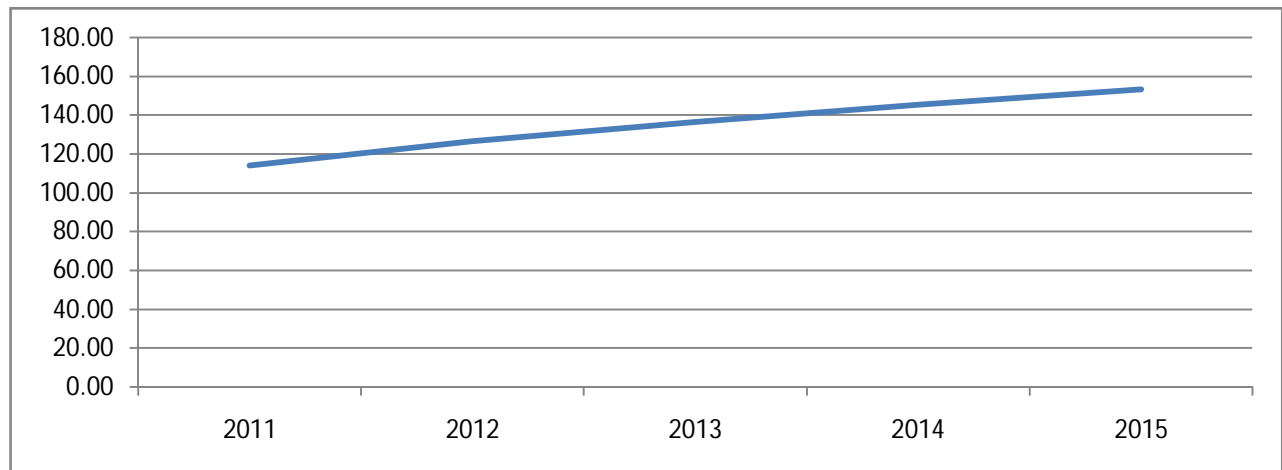


Figure 1: U.S. online travel booking revenues 2011-2015 (in billion \$). Source: eMarketerResearch, U.S. Digital Travel Sales (2011-2015).

Figure 1 shows the increase of the online booking from year 2011 to 2015 when it reached \$39.30 billion in online sales. This huge increase shows that more customers are using online booking, and more competitors are getting in the E-business market. As a result, traditional and online travel agencies would face a major challenge, due to the direct sales that is provided from the supplier to customer directly.

Anckar (2003) investigated if traditional travel agents will be obsolete from the online booking. He did a survey by studying consumer objective, and goal data when booking online. His finding was almost all customers who use online booking was to look for information, prices, activities, but didn't book any trip online. But rather go to traditional travel agent with their finding and book it with them. A total of 72.4% of respondents reported that they currently use the internet to look for travel-related information such as destination information and prices (Anckar, 2003). Although the data shows a significantly growing number of consumers to abandon traditional travel agencies when booking holiday journeys (Anckar, 2003), the findings did reveal that traditional travel agencies remain highly important.

Gasson (2003) stated that 80% of travel revenue is booked through traditional travel agencies as they continue to provide a useful and necessary service to consumers. Lasley and Harryman (1998) discussed the reasons why traditional travel agents will always play a role in the booking process for a number of consumers. Travel agents handle all the things that consumers don't want to deal with, including making reservations at hotels, finding good air fares, doing all the planning and background work. For this reason, it is not likely that the Internet will ever replace the personal expertise of travel agents.

The prospective traveler who deals with a travel agency usually gets effective, personal service and can benefit from the expertise of the agent. Travel agencies can issue plane tickets on behalf of the provider, but also act in the consumer's interests (Lewis & Talalayevsky, 1997). For example, an agent may recommend using a different airline than the one initially suggested by the passenger, in order to provide a quicker or cheaper way to get to a destination. Lewis and Talalayevsky (1997) believed it will be sometime before information systems, computer networks, and virtual travel agencies completely replace the convenience and reliability of a telephone or personal conversation with a travel agent.

Traditional travel agents role is to experience a change over the next few years as online agencies continue to grow. Owners and managers of brick-and-mortar travel agencies should adopt to E-commerce and attempt to develop and train their employees in the potential of E-commerce in order to remain as a viable business. Although online travel bookings continue to grow, there will always be a need for traditional travel agents who will serve an increasingly smaller pool of individual customers who do not want to spend their own time making travel arrangements via the Internet (Mayr & Zins, 2009).

7.3 Challenges for the Travel and Tourism Industry

There are a number of challenges for E-commerce in the travel industry. The challenge for airlines, in common with other businesses, is to offer a consistent customer experience across channels. Customers shopping on an airline Web site expect the same level of service that they would get through a travel agent.

Customers buying airline tickets via a third-party Web site, such as Travelocity, expect the same sort of treatment, including recognition of frequent flier privileges. Offline travel agent businesses have been shut down by web operations. There has not been the meltdown that was predicted at the height of the Internet business boom. Online travel agents originally threatened to cut out high street agents, but now they are themselves being threatened by low-cost airlines expanding their holiday services into car rental, hotels and insurance (New Media Age, 2007).

7.4 The Role of Traditional Travel Agents in the Experience Economy

Jackson (1997) defined tourism as intangible product that cannot be touched or seen. Because of that travel agents must give the rich, and correct information to make the travelers fantasize of their trip. As the result of his study he finds that E-commerce changed the role of brick-and-mortar travel agencies to become an expert advisor in the tourism field. Ozturanand (2004) claimed the key strength for traditional travel agencies is the ability to advice to travelers continuously, and provide personal information.

Britton (1989) the major competitive advantage that affects the quality of the travel experience in tourism is information. In the travel industry, experiences and service are bought and sold together. Consumer's behaviors are changing toward tourism; they expect experiences and service quality from their travel agents. Based on the experience and service quality that is provided from the travel agents will affect the decision of the consumers to purchase the trip or not (Yeoman et al., 2005)

8. Methodology

The purposes of this quantitative and qualitative study were to explore brick-and-mortar travel agents' perceptions regarding the impact of E-commerce on the traditional travel agencies, and to determine if these opinions vary as a function of the size of the travel agency, and years of travel agent experience. In addition, brick-and-mortar travel agents were queried regarding their recommended strategies for gaining a competitive advantage relative to E-commerce travel agents.

Initially, the mixed-method research design for this study is described. Then, the population of interest and sampling procedures for this study are presented. The survey instrument used for data collection is presented, and the data collection and analysis procedures are discussed.

8.1 Data Collection

All data for this study were collected using the Survey Monkey online data collection service. A list of eligible participants was obtained from the marketing research firm. A pilot study was performed prior to the main study data collection in order to examine the reliability and validity of the survey data. For both the pilot study and the main study data, this list of email addresses obtained from the marketing research firm was submitted to Survey Monkey, and invitations to participate in the study were emailed. Potential participants were directed to the Survey Monkey website. The informed consent statement (shown in Appendix A) was displayed on the web page and participants consented to the survey by clicking "I agree" at the bottom of the informed consent information. Participants then completed the survey online. The data were exported to an SPSS database for analysis.

The pilot study included 30 participants from the sampling pool assembled by the market research firm. Using an expected response rate of 35.7% (Baruch & Holtom, 2008), invitations were sent to 84 individuals for the pilot study to obtain the sample of 30 pilot study participants. The main study required 84 participants to achieve adequate statistical power. Based on the expected response rate, 359 individuals from the sampling pool were invited to participate in the main study.

8.2 Data Analysis

The pilot study data were examined to assess the reliability of the Total Impact score discussed above. A Cronbach's alpha internal consistency reliability coefficient was computed for this score to ensure that it meets the minimum reliability criterion of .70. If the reliability of the Total Impact score did not reach this level, revisions to the survey would have been made including the revision of items that did not contribute to the reliability of the score and replacing them with additional items.

For the main study data, both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were performed. Initially, descriptive statistics were computed for all study variables. This consisted of means and standard deviations for all continuous variables and frequencies and percentages for all categorical variables. Inferential analyses were then performed to test the null hypotheses of this study. Inferential analyses were performed using two-tailed tests and an alpha level of .05.

The null hypothesis for this research question was:

H₀. Travel agents' perceptions regarding the impact of E-commerce on brick-and-mortar travel agencies do not change with the respect to the agent years of experience in the travel agency industry.

The independent variable for this null hypothesis was the travel agent years of experience, and the dependent variable was the Total Impact score. The Pearson correlation between Total Impact scores and years of experience was computed to test this null hypothesis.

A content analysis of the participants' responses to the two open-ended survey questions was then performed. According to Elo and Kyngas (2008), content analysis is an analysis method "for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context, with the purpose of providing knowledge, new insights, a representation of facts and a practical guide to action" (p. 108). The primary goal of the content analysis performed in the proposed study was to identify the major themes related to the impact of E-commerce travel agencies on traditional travel agencies and the strategies used by traditional travel agents to remain competitive with E-commerce travel agencies. Initially, the responses to the two open-ended questions were read. Then, preliminary coding categories were developed and the responses were coded as to the presence or absence of each coding category. Based on the preliminary coding and the review of the responses, the final set of codes was developed and the responses were coded according to the presence or absence of each code. The dominant codes (i.e., those that occur most frequently) were then developed as the major themes and representative quotations were used to demonstrate the participants' perspectives related to each theme.

9. Results

9.1 Travel Agency and Job-Related Characteristics

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for the survey questions about the travel agency and job-related characteristics of the participants. The most common approximate annual sales volume for the travel agencies was between \$5 million and \$10 million (30.4%). Relatively few agencies had very low annual sales volumes of less than \$250,000 (16.7%) or very large annual sales volumes of \$10 million or more (10.8%). The location of most of the primary businesses was a travel agency (66.7%). The participants indicated that their agency provided a variety of services including airline tickets (84.3%), tours and packages (83.3%), cruises (67.6%), business travel (52.0%), and luxury travel (51.0%). Lower-end services such as bus and railroad tickets (31.4%) and rental cars (37.3%) were less common. All participants indicated that they used telephones to interact with clients, while 94.1% used face-to-face communication, 92.2% used email, and 45.1% used online booking engines.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for the Travel Agency Characteristics of the Sample (N = 102)

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Services provided		
Airline tickets	86	84.3
Luxury travel	52	51.0
Business travel	53	52.0
Tours and packages	85	83.3
Cruises	69	67.6
Travel insurance	49	48.0
Rental cars	38	37.3
Bus and railroad ticket	32	31.4
Group travel	43	42.2
Methods used to inter		
Face-to-face	96	94.1
Telephone	102	100.0
Online booking engine	46	45.1
E-mail	94	92.2
What, if anything, has		
Offline sales have incr	2	2.0
It has made no differe	14	13.7
Offline sales have deci	10	9.8
There is no relationshi	13	12.7
Do not have an online	42	41.2
Do not have an offline	0	0.0
Don't know	21	20.6
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Years of experience as	13.12	11.64
Percentage of sales vo	15.32	21.82
Percentage of sales vo	21.69	25.95

Growth in Internet sales in the past 2 to 3 years tended to be as expected (39.2%) as or higher than expected (34.3%). In regard to how an online presence has affected offline sales, 41.2% of the participants indicated that they do not have an online presence and another 20.3% indicated that they did not know how their online presence has affected their offline sales. Of the remainder, most participants felt that their online presence made no difference in their offline sales (13.7%) or, similarly, that there was no relationship between the online presence and offline sales. The average number of years as a traditional travel agent was 13.12 years ($SD = 11.64$ years). The number of branch offices averaged 2.44 ($SD = 4.55$) while the number of employees averaged 5.93 ($SD = 5.34$). The participants reported that an average of 15.32% of their sales volume was made via the Internet ($SD = 21.82$), and that they expected that an average of 21.69% of their sales volume would be made via the Internet in the next 3 years ($SD = 25.95$).

Table 2: Correlations Among Total Impact Scores, and Years of Experience (N = 102)

Variable	Total Impact
Total Impact	-
Years of Experience	-.27*

* $p < .01$

Null Hypothesis The null hypothesis for this research question is:

H₀. Travel agents' perceptions regarding the impact of E-commerce on brick-and-mortar travel agencies do not change with the respect to the agent years of experience in the travel agency industry.

Table 2 indicates that the correlation between Total Impact scores and years of experience was $r = -.27, p = .005$. This correlation was statistically significant and therefore the second null hypothesis was rejected. The negative correlation indicated that participants with less experience tended to believe that there was a greater impact of E-commerce on the traditional travel agencies than participants with more experience.

10. Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

10.1 Discussion

In this study, travel agent perceptions toward the impact of E-commerce in the United States were explored. In addition, comparisons of these perceptions based on the travel agents' years of experience in the travel industry were made.

A quantitative study was performed using an ex-post facto research design (Creswell, 2009). years of experience were the independent variables in this study, while the dependent variable was a total impact score based on the travel agents' opinions regarding the impact of E-commerce on the traditional travel agencies (with low scores indicating no impact and high scores indicating a strong impact). The population of interest in this study consisted of travel agents employed at brick-and-mortar travel agencies in the United States with the sample consisting of members of this population who consented to participate in this study recruited through a marketing research firm.

The null hypothesis was rejected because the correlation between Total Impact scores and years of experience was statistically significant ($r = -.27, p = .005$), indicating that travel agents with more experience tended to believe that there was a smaller impact of E-commerce on the traditional travel agencies than participants with less experience who perceived a larger impact of E-commerce.

10.2 Conclusions

Based on the results from this study, three primary conclusions were drawn. In relation to the null hypothesis tests related to travel agent years of experience it was concluded that travel agents with more experience tended to believe that the effect of E-commerce on brick-and-mortar travel agencies was smaller than did travel agents from with less experience. Although some past studies have indicated that E-commerce would be devastating for traditional travel agents (Ancker, 2003; Licata et al., 2001; McCubbrey, 1999), other studies have indicated that travel agents could prosper if they focused on providing good customer service (Naisbitt, 2001). Based on the results from the current study, it appears that more experienced agents from larger agencies have been more successful in making the transition to E-commerce in the travel industry.

10.3 Recommendations for Professional Practice

It is recommended that travel agents with less experience and those from smaller travel agencies should adopt the recommended strategies in order to remain competitive in the changing travel industry. Based on the finding that travel agents with less experience and travel agents from smaller companies tended to be more concerned about the effects of E-commerce, they may be in a position to benefit more from adopting strategies such as focusing on a customer service orientation through access to agents, face-to-face contact, and offering a human touch. They may also benefit from taking a value-added perspective, adopting some E-commerce strategies and tools, diversifying across markets, and networking among customers and suppliers. If these steps are taken the negative effects of E-commerce on brick-and-mortar travel agents may be mitigated.

Travel agents from larger agencies and those with more experience tended to believe that the effect of E-commerce on brick-and-mortar travel agencies was smaller than did travel agents from smaller agencies and those with less experience.

Based on these conclusions, it was recommended that travel agents with less experience and those from smaller travel agencies (i.e., those who tended to be more concerned about the effects of E-commerce) should adopt new strategies to mitigate the negative effects of E-commerce. These strategies could include:

1. Focusing on customer service.
2. Take a value-added perspective.
3. Adopting E-commerce strategies and tools.
4. Diversifying across markets
5. Networking among customers and suppliers.

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