

A Look at Religious Tourism Marketing: What do Consumers Prefer?

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Abstract

Advances in technology and rising incomes around the globe have resulted in increased international travel over the past few decades. For many individuals, religious tourism is the preferred mode of travel. Religious tourism has been defined by Management and Tourism scholar Somnuck Jongmeewasin (2015) as “a form of tourism, whereby people of faith travel individually or in groups for reasons related to religion or spirituality in their quest for meaning.”

Some scholars note that religious tourism is the oldest form of tourism due to the concept of pilgrimage and the fact that this phenomenon has been going on for thousands of years (Pohner, Berki and Ratz 2009). Religious tourism statistics are difficult to obtain, but as of 2013, the United Nation’s World Tourism Organization approximated that over 300,000 individuals went on pilgrimages (UNDATA n.d.).

These types of travelers are dedicated to their visit, and often save for many years to afford the trip of a lifetime. As a result, they are very aware of marketing efforts to promote such trips. And many religious travelers make a pilgrimage as part of their faith journey, so they want to get the most out of the experience, with upgrades and add-ons. This increased religious tourism has resulted in increased marketing for this segment of international travel. Most consumers will perform research online before making a major purchase, such as this type of holiday, and in doing so they are exposed to hundreds of marketing messages (Kerin, Hartley and Rudelius 2015).

One particular hotspot for religious tourism is Jerusalem, Israel, which is considered to be a holy city for the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Most of the three million tourists to Israel each year visit for religious reasons. This is economically significant because, as of 2016, Israel derives 6.8% of its GDP from tourism as of 2016 (Israel – Travel and Tourism 2017).

This abstract will preview the results of a survey given to religious tourists who have visited Israel within the past year. Israel has a highly developed religious tourism industry, but is not frequently studied by business researchers. However, some work has been done using Parasuraman’s SERVQUAL model (1988) to determine the factors that consumers value in a holy pilgrimage. One example is Eid’s (2012) analysis of the Hajj travelers using SERVQUAL. Stefko, Kiralova and Mudrik (2015) looked at religious tourism in Slovakia, and the fact that deficiencies in marketing communications or infrastructure can hinder economic development and the growth of the industry. Another significant business-oriented piece is from Olsen (2006), who discussed the management issues that must be addressed for religious sites. Therefore, while literature exists, there is much work to be done in this area in order to provide marketers and managers with useful information that can be used to increase the market for religious tourism, and the revenues this market generates.

In this analysis, marketing messages from holy sites and tourist businesses in Israel will be evaluated to determine which messages are most effective in reaching these religious tourists. The survey includes questions regarding which modes of marketing and types of marketing messages are most useful to consumers who are purchasing a religious-based trip. Closed-ended and open-ended questions are included to gain a rich set of data to illuminate the analysis. Extensive data analysis will be conducted at a later date, but preliminary findings are listed below. Initial results from the survey reveal some interesting findings that will be reported in a formal paper after all surveys are collected and analyzed. One early result is that religious tourists are definitive in their tourism objectives. Most noted specific locations to visit as “must-dos”. Other early findings indicate that religious tourists are “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their trip experience, likely due to the fact that they have a planned itinerary. As expected, religious tourists spend significant funds on their “once-in-a-lifetime” experiences, and so they express few concerns over budget or travel expenses or even extra expenses along the way. These early findings are in line with research expectations and will generate interesting conclusions when paired with the

other survey results in the final analysis.

Thus, the marketing preferences of these religious tourists can shed light on other regions that specialize in religious tourism and even other forms of tourism. Success strategies will be shared in the final paper that can be used by managers and marketers alike to increase the value of the trip and maximize the experience of the travelers. Suggestions for future research will be given.

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners: This exploratory research study looks at the marketing preferences of religious tourists. It will highlight marketing practices that these tourists note as effective.

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TRACK: Global Marketing