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MINNESOTA'S COMMUNITY TOURIST INFORMATION SERVICES

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This paper summarizes responses from 94 Minnesota Chambers of Commerce and similar operations, in which they report information services provided to visitors. It focuses upon the extent and ability of these operations to respond to questions about the community, region and state. But it does not deal with advertising/promotional activities which are not in response to direct questions.

Provided here is the best overview available to date about Minnesota's traveler/visitor information services. The discussion which follows and the five tables report characteristics of the operations, the number and kinds of questions asked, literature used and needed, and problems encountered in providing information services to travelers.

The data were gathered by the University of Minnesota in cooperation with the Division of Tourism, Minnesota Department of Economic Development. This was done in the Fall of 1978. Chambers of Commerce from throughout Minnesota responded to the questionnaire, which is attached as appendix 1.

WHO, HOW AND WHY?

Chambers of Commerce, operators of travel attractions and of hospitality services will find this information useful, as will agency staff members, elected officials and citizens who are interested in developing the tourism industry and the community's services to travelers and visitors. Tables II, III, IV and V also provide insights that may help regional and state agencies in supporting information services.

Information is a part of the access to a community. It is a necessary complement to highway, airport, bus and rail terminal systems. That is, no one goes to a museum, attends a performance, or takes part in an activity that they do not know about. Nor do they stay in a motel or eat in a restaurant that they cannot find.

The information services dealt with by this paper have to do with people who already are interested in the given community. They are physically present asking questions face to face; they write; or they telephone. Treated here is the next necessary step beyond promotion/advertising activity in which the firm or community reaches out to prospective visitors - usually in the prospect's home community. This latter is an effort to attract interest and a possible visit.

Here we have a bird-in-the-hand situation. The most elusive job - getting attention - has been done. But whether or not they come at all, in the case of telephone or mail inquiries; or whether they move on down the road, stay overnight, or for several days, depends upon how well the questions are answered. It depends upon the attitude of response, and kinds of literature and maps available. The customer is interested - can we "sell" them the community and its services?

In order to improve comparability of data with individual communities, breakdowns are given by size of community and by geographic location within the state. The three geographic locations are defined as follows:

Metro/ Includes the seven-county Minneapolis-St. Paul Metropolitan
Exurban area plus all adjoining Minnesota counties. These latter may be viewed as the exurban ring. A total of 16 counties make up the metro-exurban group.

North Includes counties north of the Twin Cities. Meeker, Kandiyohi, Pope, Stevens and Big Stone are the most southerly of this group.

South Includes all Minnesota counties lying to the south of the above two groups of counties.

CHARACTERISTICS OF TOURIST INFORMATION SERVING AGENCIES

All but four percent of the Chambers of Commerce reporting said that they handled visitors' questions. Twenty-seven percent reported that providing traveler information was a major part of their function. This latter proportion was much higher in the North, 50%, compared to the South, 24%, and Metro, 10%. Such differences reflect a greater relative importance of tourism to northern communities.

Twenty-nine percent of the operations had specialized staff to handle information. Again the proportion was higher in the North, 49%, compared to the South, 16%, and Metro, 10%.

Most, 94%, of these agencies operated year-round. But there was a great seasonal difference in the number of inquiries handled. Busiest weeks averaged five times as many inquiries as the slowest weeks - 245 compared to 48. It might also be noted that the flow of inquiries was much more uniform in the Metropolitan/Exurban area.

QUESTIONS ASKED

Most questions were asked by mail - 42%, with face-to-face inquiries running a close second at 36%. In the Northern area face-to-face questions out-numbered those received by mail. This may reflect two factors:

The need of vacationing people for information while in their vacation area; and the visability and availability of information stations in Northern communities.

Requests for information about things to see and do lead the list. But this type of question was barely more frequent than inquiries about services and accommodations. Thus, the typical traveler asks "Where can I fish?" or "What is going on tonight?"; followed by "Can you help me find a good motel or resort, or a place to camp?".

Help in finding directions ranked third in importance overall. It was also closely paralleled in importance by questions about the community's living and business features. As might have been expected this latter question was relatively much more important in the Metro/Exurban region where 11 out of 22 operations said it was frequently asked. This compares to only 13 out of 72 operations in the rest of the state.

LITERATURE

Literature used reflects not only travelers needs but also what is available (see table III). Among the types of literature most often used were brochures of the local area. This indicates a healthy situation, in that many communities have prepared literature for distribution.

Twelve percent indicated a need for a better local brochure (see table IV). But the most often reported shortages were in state and other regional literature and state maps.

Discussions with Chamber of Commerce personnel indicate that not all are aware of the full range of state and regional information available. A toll free number, 800-652-9067 may be used to access the publications on parks and natural resources available through the Department

of Natural Resources. For tourism and regional publications available through the Minnesota Division of Tourism contact: Information Officer, Division of Tourism, Department of Economic Development, 480 Cedar St., St. Paul, MN 55101, phone 612-296-5015.

PROBLEMS

Getting access to the information needed to answer questions adequately was reported as the most serious problem faced in running an information service (table V). This led the list of reported problems. It indicates the need for good reference material at the local, regional and state levels. Readers interested in developing local materials are referred to Extension Folder 472, Know Your Community.

Sufficient money for operations was reported as another serious problem. Qualified staff was another. These two together equal in importance the problem of getting information. Since staff can translate into dollars it is valid to sum these two.

Other problems include available, accessible facilities, and signing.

Table I. CHARACTERISTICS OF MINNESOTA'S COMMUNITY TOURIST INFORMATION SERVING AGENCIES*

	Geographic Areas			Size Classes		All
	North	South	Metro/ Exurban	Under 5000 pop.	Over 5000 pop.	
Number Replying	45	27	22	50	44	94
1. How is Information Operation Financed?						
A. Government	3%	4%	5%	3%	5%	4%
B. Community organization	77%	88%	55%	82%	68%	75%
C. Business using	6%	0%	5%	3%	5%	4%
D. Combination including B.	14%	8%	35%	12%	22%	17%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
2. Proportion Operating Year-Round	92%	92%	100%	93%	95%	94%
3. Traveler Information a Major Purpose	50%	24%	10%	24%	29%	27%
4. Specialized Staff for Information Stand	49%	16%	10%	26%	32%	29%
Average number of staff	2.75	2.0	1.25	2.5	2.65	---
5. Written Record of Travelers & Questions	51%	33%	38%	50%	37%	43%
6. Number of Weekly Inquiries						
A. Busiest Weeks, Ave.	373	61	220	128	360	245
Highest	2,500	750	3,185	1,500	3,185	3,185
Lowest	2	2	0	0	0	0
B. Slowest Weeks, Ave.	34	9	114	11	74	48
Highest	200	50	2,000	150	2,000	2,000
Lowest	0	0	0	0	0	0

The top row of figures give the number of Chambers of Commerce in each category that replied. Figures for items 1 through 5 are percentages replying to the given question. Item 6 shows number of inquiries for busiest and slowest weeks.

Table II. QUESTIONS MOST OFTEN ASKED**

	North	South	Metro/ Exurban	All
	%	%	%	%
1. Form of Inquiries				
A. Face to Face	45	31	23	36
B. Telephone	17	24	29	22
C. Mail	<u>38</u>	<u>45</u>	<u>48</u>	<u>42</u>
Total	100	100	100	100
2. Kind of Inquiries				
Things To See and Do				
A. All Requests	96	93	82	92
B. Sightseeing & Attractions	(53)	(41)	(36)	(46)
C. Cultural/historic	(9)	(19)	(14)	(13)
D. Fishing/Watersports	(31)	(15)	(5)	(20)
Accommodations				
A. All Accommodations Requests	82	100	77	86
B. Hotel, Motel	(27)	(52)	(36)	(36)
C. Food Service	(0)	(22)	(23)	(12)
D. Resorts	(29)	(7)	(9)	(18)
E. Campgrounds	(27)	(19)	(9)	(20)
Directions	36	26	18	29
Maps				
A. Local	11	15	9	12
B. State	2	7	0	3
Area Living & Business information (includes shopping, information for those moving, business climate)	13	26	50	26

** Figures in part 2 are in percentages of the number replying from each geographic area. Hence, comparisons of relative importance may be made with any other figure. Figures in parentheses () are contained within the figure immediately above that is not in parentheses. Figures not in parentheses may include numbers in addition to the subgroups in parentheses below them. Multiple responses were tallied hence columns may add to more than 100 percent.

Table III. LITERATURE USED*

	North	South	Metro/ Exurban	Total
	%	%	%	%
Brochures				
A. All brochure responses	111	130	100	114
B. Local (city, county)	(5)	(67)	(64)	(59)
C. Regional	(33)	(48)	(23)	(35)
D. State: Vacation Lt: Park Lt.	(13)	(15)	(14)	(14)
E. Other States and Regions	(7)	(-)	(-)	(3)
Maps				
A. All map responses	64	56	55	60
B. Local	(24)	(33)	(36)	(30)
C. State	(33)	(11)	(9)	(21)
Accommodations Literature	31	11	27	24
Separate Literature of Events and Activities	18	11	--	12

* See note following table II.

Table IV. LITERATURE NEEDS*

	North	South	Metro/ Exurban	Total
	%	%	%	%
Better Local Brochure	16	11	5	12
Better Local Maps	7	11	14	10
Own Regional Literature	--	11	18	7
Info. on Things to See and Do	16		14	11
Campground Information	7	11	--	7
Better availability for State & Other Regional Literature	36	7	5	20
State maps	31	7	5	18

* See note following table II.

Table V. PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH INFORMATION STATION OPERATION*

	North	South	Metro/ Exurban	Total
	%	%	%	%
Information available (Staying up-to-date on information; finding out what is available and getting it, some expressed need for one place to go for it. Includes local as well as state information)	36	33	45	37
Money and Funding (Includes money to stay open when needed and money for enough staff)	38	22	9	27
Time to Handle Information Requests (By staff where information is not a major item)	4	7	-	4
Available Facilities (Having where traveler can find it and open and accessible including adequate signing)	11	7	5	9
Qualified Staff (Hard to get people who know the community and/or to train them properly. For smaller ones - volunteer help scarce)	18	4	5	11
Signing General - (So directions can be followed and travelers can find what they seek)	7	4	-	4

* See note following table II.

AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

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Classroom-Office Building
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MINNESOTA INFORMATION OFFICES SURVEY 1978

If your organization provides direct information to travelers in response to questions please help us by completing this short questionnaire. You are included if you answer travelers' questions about your community face-to-face, by telephone or by mail. Do not include promotional activities which are not in response to questions, but literature used may be promotional in part.

1. Name of your organization and/or your information service

2. How is your information operation financed?

___ by local government; Government type _____

___ by Chamber of Commerce or other similar Community organization

___ Business people who use the services

___ other financing, please name _____

3. Season of operation of information service

___ year round

___ not year round; give months of operation _____

4. Is the provision of traveler information (X one only)

___ A major purpose?

___ Incidental to other purposes?

5. Do you hire personnel primarily to staff an information stand?

___ yes; If "yes", how many in 1978? _____ (number)

___ no

6. Number of inquiries handled weekly:

___ during busiest weeks?

___ during slowest weeks?

(over)

7. _____ Estimate the percentage of your inquiries handled:

face-to-face _____%

by telephone _____%

by mail _____%

other _____%

100%

8. Do you keep a written record of travelers who request information?

_____ yes; _____ no

9. Please give the three kinds of questions most often asked:

a. _____

b. _____

c. _____

10. What kinds of literature or information pieces do you use most now to help travelers (consider local, regional state, etc.)?

11. What kinds of literature pieces do you need that are not now readily available?

12. What do you consider to be the biggest problem or problems faced in on-going operation of an information service to travelers?

Use added sheets if necessary.

Thank you for your assistance.



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