1994 Winter Conversion Study:

Media Effectiveness, Travel Planning and

1-800-VERMONT

Walter F. Kuentzel

William Valliere

University of Vermont

School of Natural Resources

Prepared for the Vermont Department of Travel and Tourism

December 26, 1994
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables and Figures .............................................. 3

Introduction ................................................................. 4

Executive Summary ....................................................... 5

Methods
   Sampling ........................................................................... 8
   Measurement ..................................................................... 9
   Analysis ........................................................................ 10

Advertising Effectiveness
   Recall and Influence ....................................................... 11
   Estimating a Conversion Rate ......................................... 19

Travel Inquiries and the Travel Decision
   Travel Planning ............................................................. 24
   Determinants of the Travel Decision ................................. 27

Visitor Profile
   Trip Characteristics ....................................................... 31

Discussion ........................................................................... 34

Appendix 1 - Call Disposition of the Sample ....................... 39

Appendix 2 - Questionnaire .............................................. 40
LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1 - Impact of advertising on Boston area inquiries ............................................. 13
Table 2 - Persuasive effect of advertisement net of prior travel intentions ................. 14
Table 3 - Persuasive effect of follow-up brochures net of prior travel intentions .......... 15
Table 4 - Crosstabulation of reasons for requesting information with prior travel plans 17
Table 5 - Crosstabulation of reasons for requesting information with prior travel plans 17
Table 6 - Crosstabulation of plans for future trips with memory of advertisement ........ 19
Table 7 - Conversion estimates for 1994, 1993, 1992 .................................................. 22
Table 8 - Importance of various sources of information in travel decision ................. 23
Table 9 - Why visitors chose to visit Vermont during the 1994 winter season ............. 29
Table 10 - Why nonvisitors did not visit Vermont during the 1994 winter season ........ 30
Table 11 - Trip Characteristics for 1994, 1993 and 1992 ............................................. 31
Table 12 - Accommodations of visitors during their 1994, 1993 and 1992 stays .......... 32
Table 13 - Visitor expenditures for 1994 and 1993 ..................................................... 33
Table 14 - Visitor activities during the 1994 winter visit to Vermont ....................... 34
Table 15 - Visitor characteristic for visitors to Vermont in 1993 and 1994 ................. 35

Figure 1 - Percent of the sample that made winter trips by month of inquiry ............. 25
INTRODUCTION

During June of 1994, researchers at the University of Vermont conducted a "winter conversion" study to determine the effectiveness of the Vermont Department of Travel and Tourism's advertising campaign during the 1993/1994 winter season. The study surveyed a sample of 270 Boston area residents who had called the 1-800-VERMONT asking for travel information about Vermont vacations. Respondents were asked questions about whether they visited the state, how they typically make their travel decisions, and whether the promotional materials on Vermont helped their travel decisions. The purpose of the study was threefold:

1) Most importantly, the study was designed to gauge the extent to which the advertisements influenced people's decisions to visit Vermont during the winter months?

2) Second, to better understand the travel decision making process, the study investigated how far in advance people begin planning for a Vermont vacation. The study sampled people who called the 1-800-VERMONT number between June, 1993 and February, 1994. Respondents were then asked if they visited Vermont for a vacation at any time during the winter months. We then compared visitor ratios by month to see which months winter visitors were mostly likely to request travel information.

3) Finally, this study compared the effectiveness of the 1-800-VERMONT number with a more difficult to remember toll-free number used prior to the summer of 1993. The
Vermont Department of Travel and Tourism began using the 1-800-VERMONT number in June, 1993, resulting in an immediate increase in the number of travel inquiries. The study compared results of this sample who had access to the 1-800-VERMONT number with Boston area samples in 1992 and 1993 studies who did not have access to a 1-800-VERMONT number. This provided a natural experiment that allowed us to compare conversion rates between an easily remembered inquiry number and a not so easily remembered inquiry number.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 31.5% of the sample visited Vermont during the 1994 winter season.

- This visitor ratio is lower than past conversion studies because of an extended sampling frame that included people who had requested travel information between June, 1993 and February, 1994. Half of the sample (53%) requested information between the months of June and August, and only 15% made a winter visit to Vermont. Among the other half that requested travel information between September, 1993 and February, 1993, 52% made a winter time visit.

- The conversion rate from the 1994 winter promotion was between 5.9% and 29.4%. The advertisements convinced 5.9% of the sample to visit the state, when they had not previously planned to visit. If we include those visitors who had planned to visit Vermont, but said the advertisements made them follow through with their plans, the conversion rate was 18.6%. Finally, if we also include those nonvisitors who said the ads prompted them to plan future trips to Vermont, the conversion rate jumps to 29.4%.

- People requesting travel information from the 1-800-VERMONT toll-free number generally call about 2 months prior to their trip.
The data also indicates a visitor ratio threshold of about 50% to 60%. That is, roughly half of the state’s inquiries can be expected to visit the state and most visit within about eight weeks of their request.

Data indicates that the use of the 1-800-VERMONT number, which began in June of 1993, may be a double edge sword. On the one hand, it enables the state to put travel information in the hands of more people who are already planning trips to the state. On the other hand, there was an increase in the number of people between 1993 and 1994 who could not remember the advertisement that prompted their information inquiry, and who had no plans to make a future trip to Vermont. This indicates that an easily remembered toll-free number may be increasing the number of unqualified inquires from people who like to collect free brochures and catalogs.

The results suggest that people choose their travel destinations based on the depth of information provided them. They rely more on newspaper stories, travel guides and brochures, maps, and friend’s recommendations, and less on advertisements or calls made directly to travel related businesses.

The majority of winter visitors come to the state for the skiing. They spend roughly $650 for a family of 5 during their visit to the state. This averages out to about $275 per day.
METHODS

Sampling

The sampling frame for this study consisted of a randomly drawn list of people from the Boston metro region who called the 1-800-VERMONT inquiry number between June, 1993 and February, 1994. The research design called for a sampling frame of 600 people. Phone numbers for people who call the toll free number are generally not collected, and we had phone numbers for about one in six names on the original list of 600 people. Therefore, we had to obtain phone numbers through directory assistance in the 508 and 617 area codes. Because of unlisted numbers or unknown people, we therefore had to draw from a list of 925 names to obtain a final sampling pool of 600 names.

Researchers at the University of Vermont then called each name in the sample pool in a systematic way during June, 1994 and instructed to log the disposition of each call they made. If the individual was contacted, he or she was asked to participate in the survey and then either a) completed the survey (270 people or 45.3%), b) started the survey but cut the survey short before completion (8 people or 1.3%), or c) refused to be interviewed (54 people or 9%) (See Appendix 1). The 45% response rate is on the high side compared to other phone surveys (Groves et al, 1998). The 9% refusal rate is comparable to other phone surveys (Groves et al, 1988), and may be a little better than average given increased public mistrust of telephone intrusions. Surveys such as this one can be mistaken for hidden sales promotions, and interviewers were instructed to ensure respondents that their answers are anonymous and that they were not selling anything. The high response rate and low refusal rate can also be attributed to the experience of the interviewers. The same two people spent three weeks in June, 1994 calling
the sample. These same two people also conducted the 1993 winter conversion study, and have
developed effective phone skills and the mental toughness to deal with rude people they might
encounter on the telephone.

Where individuals in the sampling pool were not contacted, interviewers were instructed
to log the disposition of each call, and call that number back up to five times or until the
individual was contacted. For those people in the sample who were never contacted after five
follow-up calls, 82 numbers (13.7%) left on answering machines for each call back, 29 numbers
(4.9%) were wrong numbers, 30 numbers (5.0%) were business numbers with no home listing
for the individual, 16 numbers (2.7%) were disconnected numbers, 10 numbers (1.7%) were never
answered, 8 numbers (1.3%) always had fax or modems connected to them, and 3 numbers
(0.5%) were ineligible (either under 16 years old or deceased) (See Appendix 1). Further, 94
people (15.6%) asked to be called back later, and then could not subsequently be contacted again
within the five call criterion.

Measurement

Respondents were asked four types of questions. First, and most importantly, they were
asked whether or not they visited Vermont during the winter months of early 1994. If they had,
they were asked about various elements of their trip: were they stayed, how many nights they
were here, how many people they came with, and how much money they spent while visiting the
state. They were also asked what activities they did while here. Second the sample was asked
how effective the states promotion was in their travel decision, and how helpful the mailed
Guidebook was in present or future trip planning. Third, respondents were asked about their
travel decision making process. What elements of a destination are important in the choice process, and what sources of information do they typically rely on to make travel decisions. Finally, the survey asked respondents to report various socioeconomic information such as age, income, and education.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics and t-test that compared differences between conversion values for this study with conversion values from past studies were the primary analytic procedures used. Perhaps the major value of this study was the comparison with past studies. The University of Vermont has conducted three conversion studies for the Vermont Department of Travel and Tourism: one in 1992, and two in 1993. Further, the establishment of the 1-800-VERMONT number in the fall of 1993 provided a natural experiment to make comparisons between the use of an easily remembered toll-free number (1-800-VERMONT), and a not so easily remembered toll-free number that was in use during the 1992 and 1993 studies. On the one hand, the 1-800-VERMONT number increases the number of people that the state can reach with promotional material. On the other hand, one might expect that a toll-free number that is not easily remembered would attract the more motivated caller. Presumably, if one must write down a number from a television advertisement, or clip the number from a newspaper or magazine ad, they may have stronger intentions of visiting the state. Thus, this study compares the conversion rates of three different samples of Boston area residents who were surveyed in 1992, 1993, and 1994.
Comparing the Samples. There are two differences between the past two samples and the current sample. First, the 1992 survey was a quota sample, which means that the respondents were not systematically sampled. In a quota sample, not everyone in the sampling pool has an equal opportunity of selection. Therefore, one cannot be certain whether or not the sample is biased toward one group of people over another. More importantly, comparisons between the 1992 survey and others may not be very reliable.

Second, the 1992 and 1993 samples were drawn from a more constricted time frame than the 1994 sample. The 1992 sample was a summer/fall conversion study and respondents were drawn from people who called the VDTT's toll-free number between June 1992 and September 1992. The 1993 survey was a winter conversion study, but was drawn only from people who called the VDTT's toll-free number between November 1992 and February, 1993. The 1994 sample, however, was drawn from people who called the 1-800-VERMONT number between June, 1993 and February, 1994. Therefore, when comparing the 1994 sample with the 1992 and 1993 samples, we include only the responses from people who called between September, 1993 and February, 1993. People who inquired during the summer months of 1993 were included only to assess the lead time in the way people plan for winter vacations.

ADVERTISING EFFECTIVENESS

Recall and Influence

Survey respondents were first asked if they remembered the advertisement they responded to and whether they remember the follow-up travel guide the state sent them. Visitors were then asked if these materials helped in their decision to travel to Vermont while nonvisitors were
asked if these materials made them want to visit at some time in the future. Table 1 shows that out of 270 people in surveyed group, just less than 40% of the people (107 people) remember seeing the advertisement that led them to call the 1-800-VERMONT number for travel information. There is no statistically significant difference between the percentage of visitors who remember seeing the advertisement (40%) and the nonvisitors who remember seeing the advertisement (39.5%).

A substantially smaller percentage of people remembered promotional advertisements for Vermont in 1994 than in 1993. In 1993, 3 out of four people, both visitors and nonvisitors (77%) remembered an advertisement for Vermont, while only about 40% remembered an advertisement in 1994. This low memory rate among this sample may be either a sampling effect or the 1-800-VERMONT effect or both. More than half the sample was drawn from people who called the 1-800-VERMONT number between June, 1993 and August, 1993. We therefore may have asked these memory questions as much as a year after a person responded to a particular advertisement. Second, when people decide to call an easy to remember phone number like 1-800-VERMONT for travel information, they may only retain the number and remember little of the content of the advertisement.

**Visitors.** Among visitors to the state, the advertisements and follow-up brochures were primarily an information source for people who already planned to visit Vermont. Table 1 shows that 34 people of the 85 (40.0%) that visited Vermont remember seeing the ad. It is probably safe to assume that the advertisement per se had little to do with the travel decisions of the 51 people who could not remember the advertisement they responded to. Out of these 34 people who remembered the advertisement, 26 (76.5%) indicated that they had already planned a trip before
Table 1. Impact of advertising on Boston area inquiries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>FULL SAMPLE</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remembered the Advertisement</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>39.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VISITORS (n=85)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remembered the Ad</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previously Planned a Visit</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>30.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ad Helped in Travel Decision</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not At All Helpful</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only A Little Helpful</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Helpful</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Helpful</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remembered Brochures</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>94.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brochures Helped in Decision</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not At All Helpful</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only A Little Helpful</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Helpful</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Helpful</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NONVISITORS (n=185)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remembered the Ad</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>39.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ad Made You Think About Visiting Vermont</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>94.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning a Visit to Vermont Next Year</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitely Not</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probably Not</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probably Yes</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>29.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitely Yes</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>40.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
seeing the advertisement. At the same time, however, 8 said the ad helped "only a little" in their travel decision, 14 said the ad was "somewhat helpful" in their travel decision, while 7 said the ad was "very helpful" in their travel decision. A crosstabulation of the people who had already planned a trip to Vermont and those people who said the ad helped in their travel decision (Table 2) shows only 8 people, who had not previously planned on visiting Vermont, said the ad helped them a little, somewhat or very much in their travel decision.

Table 2. Persuasive effect of advertisement net of prior travel intentions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advertisement Helped Travel Decision</th>
<th>Planned to Come</th>
<th>Prior to Seeing Ad</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at All Helpful</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only a Little Helpful</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Helpful</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Helpful</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The follow-up brochures appear to be more effective in aiding respondents' travel decisions. Among those who visited the state, 80 out of 85 people (94.1%) remembered receiving the brochures. Out of this group 23 people said the brochure helped "only a little", 18 people said the brochure was "somewhat helpful" while 32 people said the brochure was "very helpful" (Table 1). Again, however, if the brochures served only as a stimulus for people to carry out a trip they had already planned, the brochures may not have actually persuaded new visitors to come to Vermont. A crosstabulation of those who had already planned to come to Vermont and