

# Tourism Research: A 20-20 Vision



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## **Tourism distribution: a review and strategic research agenda**

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# 8 **Tourism distribution: a review and strategic research agenda**

Douglas G. Pearce

Tourism distribution has attracted an increasing amount of attention from researchers over the past two decades. Factors accounting for this interest include a growing awareness that distribution constitutes one of the few remaining areas of competitive advantage; the emergence of new markets, especially in Asia, and a need to understand how best to tap them; and major changes brought about by technological advances, especially in IT. These same factors are likely to ensure ongoing interest in the field in coming years while the impact of the global economic recession will heighten the immediate drive for increased efficiencies in an activity that can account for a quarter or more of a tourism enterprise's operating costs. More generally, a focus on distribution offers tourism researchers a potentially powerful unifying concept, one that bridges the demand/supply dichotomy of much tourism research by bringing together markets and destinations, consumers, producers and intermediaries and stressing the linkages among these. This chapter traces the development of tourism distribution research, outlines its major features, and then proposes a strategic research agenda advocating a more integrated and focused approach that might advance research in this field more systematically.

## **Development**

While distribution research on manufacturing and other sectors dates back to the 1950s and 1960s (Ford, 2002), the first tourism-related studies began to appear intermittently only in the 1970s and 1980s (Kaven, 1974; WTO, 1975; Wahab *et al.*, 1976; Bitner and Booms, 1982). It is not until the 1990s that more sustained attention was given to tourism distribution. Three books at the turn of the century focused specifically on the topic and provide a good insight into the state-of-the-art at that time. O'Connor (1999) discusses the application and impact of new information technologies including GDSs (global distribution systems) and emerging online mechanisms. The edited volume by Buhalis and Laws (2001) demonstrates the breadth of interest in the field with chapters dedicated to theory and practice, channel structures, national and regional studies and technological transformations. Alcazar Martínez (2002), in the most significant non-English language contribution,

draws more directly on the broader distribution literature to discuss tourism distribution in more systematic terms before considering issues related to mass tourism in a European context.

As the literature has developed there has been no hotly-contested search for a common definition which often engages researchers in newly emerging fields. Distribution has been variously portrayed as that part of the marketing mix that ‘makes the product available’ to consumers (Wahab *et al.*, 1976: 96), as the bridge between supply and demand (Alcazar Martínez, 2002). Others draw on Stern and El-Ansary’s (1992: 1-2) statement that marketing channels are:

*sets of interdependent organizations involved in the process of making a product or service available for use or consumption – not only do marketing channels satisfy demand by supplying goods and services at the right place, quantity, quality and price, but they also stimulate demand...Therefore, the channels should be viewed as an orchestrated network that creates value for the user through the generation of form, possession, time and place utilities.*

## Approaches

In a recent review incorporating a more detailed list of references than can be included here, Pearce (2009a) identified five major approaches which capture the main thrust of extant research efforts.

### 1. A structural approach

The most common approach has been to focus on the structure of distribution channels, either of channels linking international markets and destinations (especially in Europe and Asia) or those relating to specific sectors (notably hotels and airlines). A particular focus has been on the ways in which changes in IT have impacted on traditional structures. These structural studies have generally been fairly descriptive accounts and often involve a tier-by-tier discussion of direct and indirect channels in terms of such attributes as channel depth, intermediary characteristics, the degree of integration and amount of channel specialization. Pearce *et al.* (2007) propose a more comprehensive analytical framework, based on comparative research, which links these channel attributes with market and destination characteristics and intervening distance. Scope also exists to go beyond a tier-by-tier analysis and develop a more extensive nodal network approach which emphasizes all actors in the network rather than pair-wise layers of players (Pearce, 2009b).

### 2. A behavioural approach

Other studies examine the factors that influence the behaviour of the different channel members and the relationships between them, a well-established theme in the broader distribution literature (Frazier, 1999). Research focusing on intermediaries

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