Clients’ Motivations, Perceptions, Expectations and Satisfaction Levels

The New Zealand Mountain Guiding Industry

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Mountain guiding has been offered as an activity for tourists to New Zealand for over a century. In the late Nineteenth Century European guides, accompanying clients, introduced techniques to New Zealanders working at the first Hermitage Hotel at Mt Cook who then chose mountain guiding as their profession. Guides today continue a tradition based on experience, skills and knowledge that enables them to operate as successfully as the mountains will allow. The New Zealand Mountain Guides association (NZMGA) has a qualification framework, certification and safety standards that are internationally recognised by the International Union of Mountain Guides (UIAGM). Companies offer year-round activities such as heli-skiing, avalanche courses, glacier walks, trekking, mountaineering and rock climbing courses, ice climbing and high guiding. The latter ranges from high altitude tramping, e.g. the Copland Pass, to ascents of major peaks in New Zealand or overseas in Europe, Nepal, South America, Alaska and Antarctica. Issues faced by the NZMGA include competition from overseas companies, concession procedures, maintaining traditional markets and seeking new ones, access to Mt Cook/Aoraki under Treaty claims, increased aircraft noise affecting product quality and potential conflict with other user groups. Over the 1997/98 summer climbing season the writer will conduct research focussing on the clients of NZMGA guides.

Keywords: New Zealand Mountain Guides’ Association, clients, perceptions, motivations, experience

MOUNTAIN GUIDING IN NEW ZEALAND

Professional guiding has been established for tourists in New Zealand since the first Hermitage Hotel was built at Mt Cook in the 1880s. European guides accompanying early explorers introduced techniques to their New Zealand counterparts who quickly became experts. In 1974 the New Zealand Mountain Guides’ Association (NZMGA) was formed and guides today continue a tradition based on their experience, skills and knowledge that enables them to operate successfully in the mountains.

The mountain guiding industry has a training and certification programme, audit and safety standards that have been internationally recognised by the International Union of Mountain Guides (UIAGM) since the NZMGA became a member of this organisation in 1981. Services and activities offered by New Zealand guiding companies include heli-skiing, avalanche courses, ski patrolling, mountaineering and rock climbing courses, ice climbing, heli-trekking, glacier walks, alpine pass crossings and high guiding. The latter ranges from ascents of major peaks in New Zealand’s Southern Alps to expeditions in Europe, the Himalayas, South America, Alaska and Antarctica. Over 50 guides have committed themselves to gaining the professional training required to become a NZMGA or UIAGM certified guide. Training through a variety of courses is intensive, entry standards are high and professionalism is paramount.

While a variety of international visitors and New Zealanders employ the services of NZMGA guides, the mountain guiding industry itself has never been the focus of academic research. To date companies keep limited material on clients. More research is needed to determine underlying motivations, perceptions and satisfaction levels of clients. Success can be measured by the number of new and returning clients.

Issues faced by the NZMGA include competition from overseas companies, concession procedures, maintaining traditional and seeking new markets, increased aircraft noise affecting product quality and conflict with other user groups. Currently NZMGA members are involved with assessing American guides in the USA, a country that only recently joined the UIAGM.

ADVENTURE TOURISM

New Zealand’s adventure tourism industry has products ranging from soft easy-going activities such as half-hour, guided bush walks to more demanding pursuits like mountaineering. According to Ewert (1989, p8):

what distinguishes adventure activities from those more commonly associated with outside recreation is a deliberate seeking of risk and uncertainty of outcome...only in outdoor adventure pursuits is there a deliberate inclusion of activities that may contain threats to an individual’s health or life.
Adventures in New Zealand, with respect to this definition, often exclude an element of actual risk, though risk may be perceived. However those activities associated with white water or alpine areas have a publicly renowned level of risk involvement. The Adventure Tourism Council is promoting industry-recognised qualifications and stricter guidelines for adventure tourism operators. The industry is generally moving towards a more professional attitude. The NZMGA has, in many respects, led the way for other sectors to adopt a professional approach that will lead to recognition and confirmation of high standards overseas.

**MOUNTAINEERING - RISK, CHALLENGE OR INSIGHT…?**

The pursuit of outdoor recreation activities has been studied in depth by many academics interested in motivations, perceptions of risk and the experience gained. Research centred on mountain based activities is rare and the writer is still seeking studies or research focussing on guided clients on mountaineering trips. Many assumptions have to be based on the findings of research concerning climbers in general.

In 1968 Emerson asked members of the North American Everest Expedition to record their daily impressions of the expedition activities in diaries. From this study he concluded that motivations for participating in the actual climb varied according to the uncertainty of the outcome. If success on the mountain seemed highly probable, or failure was the most probable outcome, motivation was reduced amongst all team members. However when uncertainty prevailed about the outcome motivations to climb were high. Emerson did not establish what the participants’ underlying motivations to undertake the expedition were, concentrating on motivations whilst on the expedition itself when success was of great importance.

Research into what motivates climbers has been conducted by North American and Canadian researchers. Meier (1980) regarded risky recreational activities, such as climbing, as enabling people to experience challenge, exploration, camaraderie, escape from daily troubles and communication with the natural world. Mitchell’s (1983:p 87) study of North American mountaineers concluded that:

> achievement oriented, well-educated people are led to expect a challenging and satisfying job. However their experiences in the work place do not fulfill that expectation and consequently these people seek fulfillment through risk taking activities

Thus Mitchell provided an explanation for why professional and technical workers dominate the ranks of North American mountaineers. The value of adventure activities is that they enable people to gain benefits that outweigh the risks involved. To be able to meet a challenge and derive physical or spiritual satisfaction from it gives meaning to their lives. Self-actualisation and heightened self awareness (Maslow 1968) and peak experience and flow (Czshiksentmihalyi 1975) can be gained through experiencing challenging, sometimes risky, situations.

Ewert (1985) surveyed climbers on Mt Rainier, USA observing a variety of motivations such as solitude, social contact, risk seeking, challenge, fun and the ‘quest for uncertainty’. These motivations changed as experience levels increased. They began climbing for reasons such as recognition, escape and socialisation but in the long term more intrinsic reasons, for example, exhilaration (the feeling of ‘flow’ when skill levels, the setting and the challenge are complimentary), self-awareness and testing personal skill levels dominated.

In 1986 Martin and Priest proposed that the adventure experience arises from an interplay of risk and competence, complimenting Czshiksentmihalyi’s theory. They developed a model, the Adventure Experience Paradigm, where the adventure experience can range from negative to positive experiences: (1) devastation and disaster (2) misadventure (3) peak adventure - the optimum experience (4) adventure (5) exploration and experimentation. The actual experience climbers had depended on how their experience levels complemented the real risk involved (as opposed to perceived risk).

Walle (1997) suggests that outdoor activities such as mountaineering should not be viewed solely as opportunities for participants ‘to confront nature to experience risk’, but also as an opportunity to gain ‘insight’. ‘Insight’ through climbing, by becoming more self-aware or learning practical mountaineering skills, may be of great importance to participants undertaking guided mountaineering. Risk may not be sought but it may be a side effect of the activity. Walle advocates that the marketing of adventure tourism activities can be segmented into clients who crave risk and others who seek ‘insight’. He suggests that the lucrative market of those wishing to gain ‘insight’ is under-served yet self awareness has long been acknowledged as a major benefit of climbing activities. The marketing and promotion of adventure activities could promote the ‘insightful’ benefits of adventure activities rather than the physically challenging, risky aspects.

**RESEARCH IN NEW ZEALAND**

Many studies of wilderness users and outdoor recreationists have been undertaken in New Zealand, notably Aukerman and Davison (1980), Smith et al. (1980), Jebson (1983), Kearsley (1985), Pearce and Booth (1987), Shultis (1989) and Langton (1996).

Margaret Johnston (1989) has completed the most detailed study involving climbers to date. Her research involved 915 participants from five activity groups based in mountain regions - trampers, skiers, hunters, walkers and 49 climbers (5.4% of the group). Valuable demographic information was received including age, education, employment, origin and gender. Johnston’s findings indicate that, for many people, mountaineering is a chosen leisure or recreational activity that they actively participate in over a number of years. The research utilised self-assessed experience levels for participants. Climbers assessed themselves as more experienced with...
risk which reflected the finding that they participated more frequently in their chosen activity than the four other groups. Sources of enjoyment which included an element of risk such as self-challenge, physical challenge, achievement, exhilaration, danger, peak experience and adventure were not as important to climbers as fun, scenery, physical fitness, social atmosphere, escape and the environment. The former categories however could be strong motivational forces that represent intrinsic needs of the more experienced climbers, as proposed by Ewert (1985).

A ‘Risk-Perception Continuum’ was developed by Johnston to establish individuals’ perceptions of risk and she concluded that ‘risk’ had both negative and positive consequences for climbers. Risk played a positive role by adding to the enjoyment of climbers if they found a level of risk matching their skills and resulting in the ‘flow experience’. Johnston concluded that beyond the acceptable risk level there was an upper and lower threshold of risk. The upper threshold of risk detracted from the experience of the climbers as their skill levels could not meet the challenge and they were then exposed to danger. The minimum threshold of risk, where individual’s skills and experience exceeded the challenge meant the lack of risk detracted from the experience, thus the individual may become bored. Johnston’s range of experience resulting from the risk continuum offers a differing interpretation to the interplay of risk and competence described by Martin and Priest above.

PROPOSED RESEARCH
Such research and theoretical discussions have contributed to the writer’s understanding that climbers are seeking elements of challenge (which may be physical and/or mental, involve risk and uncertainty of outcome) when pursuing their activity. By climbing they may gain a variety of benefits such as experiencing ‘flow’, solitude, spirituality and closeness to nature, a social atmosphere, learning new skills, increasing self esteem, physical exercise and self awareness. Through hiring a guide climbers can be perceived as reducing the risk of a negative outcome whilst maintaining the personal challenge – their skill levels are matched to an appropriate level of risk by a professional guide.

For many guided clients the climbing holiday could be a one-off experience, just another adventure tourism choice. By hiring a professional what are clients seeking to gain? There may be an array of motivations including the benefits above, enjoyment of scenery or peak-bagging (i.e. when deliberately climbing particular mountains on their personal ‘hit-list’). The minimisation of risk may be sought by clients employing a professional who has sound judgement and years of climbing experience, but if so will the level of challenge be inadvertently reduced, thus affecting the satisfaction levels of the experience. One of the admirable attributes of professional guides is their ability to judge a client and offer the right degree of challenge…many clients do return year after year to undertake guided activities. Others who select climbing courses may anticipate learning new skills that enable them to meet their own challenges in the future.

The types of activities, settings and experiences offered through guided mountaineering can be pitched at clients who wish a less challenging experience whilst in New Zealand’s alpine regions. Guided treks, alpine pass crossings, glacier walks and skiing are several products that meet the needs of clients wishing to experience alpine surroundings without the greater risks associated with difficult alpine climbs, thus providing an opportunity for insight.

Over the summer 1997 period the writer proposes to conduct a combination of qualitative and quantitative research into the motivations, perceptions, expectations and satisfaction levels of clients of NZMGA guides. By determining the driving forces behind their choice of activity and decision to employ a professional, it is foreseen that valuable information will be gained into the users of some of New Zealand’s more pristine wilderness areas. Data will be obtained from willing guiding companies about past clients experiences and expectations. Focus groups involving climbers and guided clients in Dunedin and Mt Cook will be conducted to ascertain general motivations, perceptions and experiences sought/gained. From the resulting information questionnaires will be devised, including open-ended questions and dispersed to clients over the main period of the 1997/98 climbing season.

In-depth interviews will be carried out with clients and guides concerning the experiences gained or observed. These interviews will be structured around the revised SWOT analysis that adapts the Manning-Haas Hierarchy, ‘ASEB Grid Analysis’, devised by McIntosh and Prentice (1997) to establish an in-depth understanding of the activities, settings, experiences and benefits sought by guided clients.

CONCLUSION
New Zealand’s alpine regions are held in awe by many - they are one of our truly unique tourism products. Guides and communities such as Mt Cook Village are attracted to the alpine environment for the lifestyle it offers. The economic and social impacts of the guiding industry undoubtedly affect many people. The researcher’s opinion is that there is great future potential for New Zealand mountain guiding companies to develop niche markets internationally. Operators may consider joint marketing campaigns, or the NZMGA itself may wish to consider marketing to selected overseas destinations, thus giving the guides and companies a strong competitive position in the international market place.

By gaining an in-depth understanding of the actual clients, information can be obtained which will help the industry to consider making such a move. The increasing trend for overseas based companies to bring clients to
New Zealand, or compete with New Zealand guides at destinations overseas, can negatively affect the guiding industry. Likewise other holiday destinations/activities are competitors. By capturing the attention of the adventure tourist and influencing their decision to hire a guide to experience New Zealand’s mountains, fulfilling their expectations so they want to come back for more, the mountain guiding industry has the opportunity for a long-term, sustainable future.

REFERENCES


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