

Antique Shops' Marketing Strategies in Rural Tourism Destinations: A Comparative Exploratory Study in the U.S. and Canada

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Abstract

With the need to increase tourism demand by focusing on alternative forms of tourism, rural tourism has gained significant attention in recent years, providing rural development with new tourism opportunities and policies in accordance with demand. This study presents a marketing view of a specific area of rural tourism, marketing mix strategies utilized by antique stores, as means of promoting tourism, and offers insight into differences in marketing strategies in a comparison format of antique stores, operating in the rural touristic regions of the northern sections of the state of New York, United States and the southern regions of the Quebec province of Canada.

Keywords: Rural Tourism, Antiquing, Marketing Strategies, Antique Stores

1. Introduction

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (1994) definition of rural tourism is a complex multi-faceted activity, and it is not just farm-based tourism, but also comprised of special interest nature holidays and ecotourism, walking, climbing and riding holidays, adventure, sport and health tourism, hunting, educational travel, arts and heritage tourism, and, in some areas, ethnic tourism.

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So there is little doubt that the rural tourism as a form of tourism is multi-faceted since the rural areas themselves are multi-faceted and dynamic, self-contained entities and for the most part, assumed to be free from urban influence, therefore making a universal definition of the subject nearly impossible. However, in almost every definition or explanation, rurality appears to be the central and unique element in the rural tourism package, and this study aims to shed light on the antiquing aspect of rural tourism by focusing on the marketing aspects of antique stores.

2. Literature Review

Since rural tourism is not just based on agriculture and farming but it includes all of the activities done in rural areas, it can be a significant contributing factor in rural areas by introducing new economical and socio cultural effects combined with agricultural activities. Tourists who visit rural areas view visiting local specialty stores and shops while vacationing as an opportunity to learn about historical, cultural and natural aspects of the overall experience of visiting a destination. According to MacDonald and Jolliffe (2003), along with cultural tourism, rural tourism contains nature, adventure, sports, festivals, handcrafts, stores, shops, and tours in rural areas as well as folklore, traditions, cultural heritage, values and life styles of people dwelling in rural areas.

The commendable role of tourism in rural development is revealed by the potentially strong linkage with many rural resources and the integration with local and regional economies in a complex manner to derive many developmental benefits (Saxena and Ilbery, 2008). Both in developed and developing countries, efforts toward creating economic opportunities via tourism in rural areas have been put into practice, and tourism supply today is considered a major alternative for development of rural areas besides agriculture industry. Lacher and Nepal (2010) comment that the alternative forms of tourism such as ecotourism and rural tourism attract many visitors into rural areas of developing countries.

In creating a sustainable environment for rural tourism enterprises, the importance of focusing on the ownership of the local population to operate these enterprises has been the emphasis of many rural area economic development initiatives. Most antique stores and shops in rural touristic regions are owned and operated by the locals as small business entrepreneurship is prevalent in these regions.

In addition, tourism initiatives in rural areas are augmented with a number of rural attributes such as festivals, celebrations, fairs, shows whether small or large, simple or complex, their process and parades that attract a large number of residents and visitors. (Nazir, Khan, Jamil, and Mehmood 2014). Ucar, Ceken, and Okten, (2010) list the important attributes of rural tourism in the following areas:

- In rural areas, increase in demand for local products increases production and therefore the income level of the producers. It creates economic value and market for handcrafts and other locally produced products, which in turn can contribute directly to local people and small businesses.
- With rural tourism, one can take a more affordable and pleasant vacation. Therefore, people with low income can participate in rural tourism.
- As a result of rural tourism, migration from rural to urban places can be prevented, and rural tourism helps overcome infrastructure inadequacy in rural areas over time.

Antiquing as a recreational activity has become a significant part of the regional rural tourism as an alternative form of tourism. Variety of antique shops in local regions can offer a unique cultural shopping experience. According to The Maine Travel Guide (2016), antique shops play a major role in tourism attraction to the region and can carry a wide product line such as “one-of-a-kind scrimshaw jewelry, knives and collectible display pieces, hand hooked original design rugs, fine American and European art, stained glass, fused glass and recycled glass items, and more. In a study by Michael (2002) it was suggested that the antique trading was indeed a tourism “trip generator,” attracting tourists to areas where antique dealers operate, as a result, generating visitors on two levels:

- As a primary generator that draws antiques enthusiasts searching for treasures.
- As a secondary generator providing visitors with a reason to extend their stay. Even for travelers with only a peripheral interest in antiques, the very existence of antique dealers at a location adds value to a destination. It was therefore concluded by Michael (2002) that the antique industry should be treated as a single industry to evaluate its significance as generators of tourism demand and visitation, creating a range of economic and social benefits that add value to existing destinations as well as sympathetically linking it to other forms of cultural and heritage tourism.

Also in a study by Grado, Strauss, & Lord, (1997) it was concluded that the antique stores were a good revenue generator for a town's overall economy in a Southwestern Pennsylvania economic impact study of antique stores, for every dollar of expenditure created by the local antiques trade made more than three dollars in flow-on income effects for that regional economy. In other words, for every dollar tourists spent at antique stores, they spent three dollars at restaurants, hotels, gas stations and other local businesses.

In some rural destinations, combining the draw of antique stores with major town festivals and events can also be a good strategy to promote local tourism. Galax, Virginia is one example of a destination where antique tourism has become an important and growing part of the town's tourism plan. According to Jordan (2015) the Old Fiddlers Convention held annually in Galax for the past 80 years has worked symbiotically with its antiques offerings along with the eight-square-block of historic district, considerable size of antique malls, consignment showrooms, restaurants, gift, book, art and wine emporiums, regularly placing Galax as a travel destination in upscale regional magazines for antique tourism.

With growing national interest in collecting antiques, collectibles, and other historical artifacts as part of tourism activity, marketing strategies deployed by antique stores can play an important role in understanding the overall market conditions of antiquing in tourism industry. Although there are no set strategies carried out by the antique stores in a uniform or consistent way across the landscape, it makes it important to acknowledge most viable strategies utilized in different settings by comparing them across different platforms. Individual entrepreneurs who target different markets may benefit from these strategies.

Jones and Alderman (2003) pointed out the importance of conducting in-depth interviews and participant observation of antique dealers and shoppers in a specific marketing format to better understand how antique products are conceptualized, commoditized, and consumed in antiques trade. This assumption falls within the parameters of how the data was collected in this study since observational research was conducted by international marketing students who were familiar with the specific marketing concepts for collecting the relevant data.

3. Purpose of the Study

The successful marketing strategy of antique shops requires the identification of a target market and development of a marketing mix (product/service, place, price and promotion) that will best satisfy the needs of this target market. This research was conducted to investigate marketing strategies *implemented* by antique shops in rural regions and whether there were differences are found in Canada and the United States.

4. Methodology

Following a methodology established in recent studies (Heroux, 2002, 2015; Heroux and Csipak, 2001, 2005; Heroux and Burns, 2000), this exploratory study, using 20 case studies, was undertaken in the contiguous regions of southwestern Quebec and northern New York/Vermont. There is substantial economic integration and cross-border traffic between the two countries in this region, and the hospitality industry targets business and leisure travelers of both nationalities (Church and Heroux, 1999). For this reason, many similarities have been observed in these studies of the hospitality industry in these two countries.

A census of the antique shops in two communities in this cross-border region was included in this research. The online Yellow Pages directory for the United States and Canada was used to identify the sampling frame of antique shops in the contiguous geographic regions along the border. The region under study was expanded until 20 establishments were identified, representing the regions as follows: 10 from Quebec and 10 from New York/Vermont. The typical antique shop in this study was an independently owned and operated family business that thus controlled its marketing strategy.

A detailed marketing strategy evaluation grid (Heroux, 2002, 2015; Heroux and Csipak, 2001, 2005; Heroux and Burns, 2000) was used to collect detailed qualitative observational descriptions and quantitative data of the antique shop marketing strategy variables. Marketing strategy refers to the target market of the establishment and the marketing mix variables designed to attract these customers.

The marketing mix variables are categorized according to the popular 4P framework (McCarthy and Perreault, 2000): Product; Place; Price; and Promotion. Three of these categories of variables are subdivided in this study to capture the breadth of the categories: Product consists of product variety variables and service-related variables; Place refers to the location of the establishment as well as store atmospherics; and Promotion includes advertising variables and personal selling variables. The comparison framework therefore consists of two cultural/geographic regions by 8 marketing variable ratings. (See table 1).

TABLE 1: Summary of the Marketing Strategy Variables Evaluation Grid

Marketing Mix (4Ps)

Product:

Product variety variables: Breadth of product line, assortment of accompanying products, size variations, quality, private labels/brands, special features, overall evaluation. (6 variables, maximum score of 30)

Service variables: customer services, customized/standardized, credit cards, empathy, reservations, hours of operation, guarantees, customer satisfaction (complaint handling), overall evaluation. (7 variables, maximum score of 35)

Place:

Location variables: Primary/secondary road (visibility), site evaluation (nearness to target market), outside appearance, private/public parking availability, detached building versus strip, general ease of access, overall evaluation. (6 variables, maximum score of 30)

Establishment atmospherics: Interior layout (free form, grid, racetrack); atmospherics—scent, lighting, color, mirrors, music, noise, signage; fixtures; cleanliness; size of crowds; type of clientele; access to disabled; overall evaluation. (12 variables, maximum score of 60)

Price:

Pricing variables: Relative high/low prices, competitive in region, group reductions, coupons/rebates, bundle or value pricing (packages offered), variety of payment options, overall evaluation. (5 variables, maximum score of 25)

Promotion:

Advertising variables: Newspapers, magazines, trade publications, television, radio, telemarketing, direct mail, internet, special promotions (sales, coupons, contests), outdoor ad and/or signage, advertising theme—testimonial, comparison, informative, humorous, etc., overall evaluation. (6 variables, maximum score of 30)

Personal selling variables: Approaching the customers, helpfulness, presenting product/service, making the sale, knowledgeable, art of listening, verbal/non-verbal cues, general appearance of staff, overall evaluation. (8 variables, maximum score of 40)

Summary rating:

Overall marketing strategy evaluation: addition of the overall rating in the categories.

The observational research was conducted by international marketing students who were familiar with the marketing concepts. Observers received training on a variety of dimensions of the research process. They received a detailed explanation of each of the variables in the Marketing Strategy evaluation grid and how each variable is operationalized. They were shown how to find and approach their assigned antique shop, how to record their qualitative observations, and how to determine a quantitative score (on a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being superior implementation) for each variable. For example, for breadth of product line, students would look at the assortment of products on the premises and make a judgment on the rating scale as to its appeal to consumers (5 would represent an outstanding assortment, beyond expectations; 3 would represent an average assortment usually found in antique shops; and 1 would be the minimum one would expect).

The trainer and trainees performed a “walk-through” of the research process prior to visiting the antique shops to ensure their understanding and consistent implementation of the data collection. Observation and listening were usually sufficient to gather information about each variable. For example, for the target market, they could look at license plates in the parking lot and see how many cars came from what state or province. They could tell what language, French or English, was spoken by the customers. They could ascertain if they were repeat customers if they appeared familiar with the establishment when they arrived, when they referred to past purchases, or when they were on first name basis with the staff. However, if some variables were difficult to observe, students were given guidelines for asking questions of the staff.

Three trained observers visited each establishment together in both regions, spending 4-5 hours in each location to record detailed notes of how each marketing strategy variable was implemented. Then, the three observers had to discuss and come to an agreement on a score (on a scale of 1 to 5, 5 representing superior implementation of the strategy) for each variable in an attempt to quantify the observational data. Since this process resulted in one rating for each variable, inter-judge reliability measures were not relevant. Each item within a variable category was weighted equally in this research. The data collection thus consisted of qualitative data, the recorded observations, and quantitative data, the assigned scores for each variable.

5. Findings

The findings are discussed below in terms of quantitative results and qualitative results. Tables 2 and 3 present the **quantitative results** of the scale ratings for each of the eight variable categories. Although tests of significance cannot be performed because of the small number of cases, inspection of the table reveals that although there are similarities in location and promotion strategies, Quebec antique stores appear to have better marketing strategies with respect to product and service, establishment design, pricing, and personal selling than New York/Vermont antiques stores. The two marketing strategy variables that received the lowest scores in both regions are Pricing and Promotion. This suggests that antique stores can improve their marketing strategies with respect to pricing and promotion.

Table 2: Marketing Strategy Summary for Antique Shops

Marketing Strategy Variable Ratings	Vermont/New York		Quebec	
	Mean	%	Mean	%
Product Variety (30)	19.21	64.03%	21.29	71.30%
Services (35)	22.29	63.69%	24.89	71.11%
Location (30)	19.64	65.47%	19.52	65.07%
Establishment Design(60)	32.91	54.86%	35.17	58.62%
Pricing (25)	11.71	46.84%	13.14	52.56%
Promotion (30)	12.20	40.67%	12.38	41.27%
Personal Selling (40)	26.81	67.03%	32.28	80.70%
Overall Marketing Strategy	153.77	61.51%	158.67	63.47%

*Mean: Average of the sum of ratings for all variables in the category.

**%: The mean results are represented as a percentage of the maximum score that could be achieved for the variable category.

Table 3: Comparison of Quebec and New York/Vermont Antique Shops on Marketing Strategy Variables Ratings

Variable	New York/VT		Quebec		Overall Sample	
	Mean	Stan. Dev.	Mean	Stan. Dev.	Mean	Stan. Dev.
Product:						
Product line	3.64	0.84	3.75	1.49	3.68	1.09
Assortment	3.50	1.02	3.50	1.20	3.50	1.06
Sizes	3.36	0.63	3.88	1.13	3.55	0.86
Quality	3.21	1.05	4.25	1.04	3.59	1.14
Brands	2.86	0.77	2.38	1.06	2.68	0.89
Special features	2.64	1.22	2.63	1.41	2.64	1.26
Service:						
Guest Services	3.64	1.60	4.50	0.76	3.95	1.40
Customization	2.71	1.44	3.13	1.64	2.86	1.49
Credit	3.14	1.88	3.75	1.75	3.36	1.81
Empathy	3.29	1.27	3.75	1.75	3.45	1.44
Hours	3.93	1.14	3.13	1.55	3.64	1.33
Guarantees	2.29	1.14	2.88	1.36	2.50	1.22
Satisfaction	3.29	1.38	3.75	1.58	3.45	1.44
Place-Location						
Visibility	3.57	1.09	3.38	0.92	3.50	1.01
Site evaluation	3.29	1.07	3.13	1.25	3.23	1.11
Appearance	2.71	1.14	3.50	1.41	3.00	1.27
Parking	3.21	1.31	3.00	1.20	3.14	1.25
Building type	3.07	1.27	3.13	1.64	3.09	1.38
Accessibility	3.79	1.19	3.38	1.60	3.64	1.33
Place-Atmosphere:						
Layout	3.14	0.95	3.63	1.19	3.32	1.04
Scent	2.71	1.20	2.88	0.99	2.77	1.11
Lighting	3.21	0.80	3.63	0.92	3.36	0.85
Color	2.79	1.05	2.38	0.92	2.64	1.00
Music	2.50	1.40	2.63	1.60	2.55	1.44
Noise	3.21	1.31	4.13	0.83	3.55	1.22
Signage	2.14	1.29	2.75	1.39	2.36	1.33
Fixtures	3.00	1.36	3.38	1.51	3.14	1.39
Cleanliness	3.14	1.29	3.25	1.28	3.18	1.26
Crowdedness	2.71	1.27	2.13	1.36	2.50	1.30
Clientele type	3.07	1.21	2.38	1.30	2.82	1.26

Disable access	1.29	0.61	2.00	1.41	1.55	1.01
Price:						
Price level	3.93	0.92	3.38	1.06	3.73	0.98
Competitive	3.00	0.96	3.50	1.20	3.18	1.05
Group discount	1.43	1.16	1.38	0.74	1.41	1.01
Coupons	1.71	1.33	1.88	1.36	1.77	1.31
Value bundling	1.64	0.74	3.00	1.41	2.14	1.21
Promotion-Ad:						
Print ads	2.43	1.22	2.50	1.31	2.45	1.22
Broadcast ads	1.64	1.15	1.25	0.71	1.50	1.01
Other ads	2.07	1.64	2.75	1.28	2.32	1.52
Special promos	1.71	1.14	1.50	0.93	1.64	1.05
Outdoor sign	2.14	1.23	2.63	1.51	2.32	1.32
Ad theme	2.21	1.31	1.75	1.16	2.05	1.25
Promotion-Selling:						
Approach	3.07	1.33	4.38	1.06	3.55	1.37
Helpfulness	3.79	1.05	4.63	0.52	4.09	0.97
Presentation	3.29	1.49	3.88	1.25	3.50	1.41
Making a sale	2.86	1.41	3.75	1.39	3.18	1.44
Knowledge	3.79	1.31	4.63	0.52	4.09	1.15
Listening	3.93	0.92	3.88	1.36	3.91	1.06
Nonverbal cues	2.29	1.20	3.38	1.60	2.68	1.43
Appearance	3.79	0.80	3.75	0.71	3.77	0.75

5.1 Product

Closer inspection of Table 3 finds several differences between the two regions on some of the product variables. The Quebec antique shops appear to have better quality products, and selection of sizes of products, from large furniture to jewelry. On the other hand, antique shops in Vermont/New York tend to have more recognizable brands or brand collectibles (e.g., Coca Cola ads, glasses, trays, etc.). Special features found in some New York/Vermont antique shops include designated dealer spaces which leads to more merchandise turnover that attracts repeat visits, profits go to not-for-profit animal shelter, and buy goods for cash. Special features found in Quebec antique shops include furniture refinishing, repairs, handmade wax, profits go the not-for-profit organization, custom painting/engraving,

5.2 Service

Service in Quebec antique stores was superior to service in the New York/Vermont region. Quebec establishments offered more guest services as well as more customized services. They also were more likely to offer guarantees and have customer satisfaction policies. From a customer convenience perspective, Quebec stores accepted more credit card and payment options. The staff also demonstrated more empathy and interest in the customers' search for specific categories of products. The New York/Vermont stores, on the other hand, had longer and more convenient store hours.

5.3 Location

Although the overall ratings were similar in both regions, the New York/Vermont antique stores had slightly better ratings for the visibility of the stores on primary rural routes, accessibility and parking facilities. The Quebec antique stores had more attractive curb appeal and storefront.

5.4 Antique Store Atmosphere

In addition to more attractive storefronts, Quebec antique stores also tend to have attractive interior layout, scent, lighting, music, signage, and fixtures. The stores tend to be well maintained, cleaner, less ambient noise, and have better access for the disabled. The New York/Vermont antique stores make better use of color on their premises and tended to attract more customers who appeared to be buyers, not just browsers.

5.5 Price

Pricing was one of the two lowest rated marketing strategy variables in both regions. Prices tended to be more favorable to the consumers in the New York/Vermont antique stores, while Quebec antique store prices were more competitive within their region relative to their close competitors. Discounts and coupons were infrequently used promotions in both regions.

Quebec antique stores were more likely to do value bundling, such as setting a discounted price for a group of items rather than individual item pricing (e.g., price for set of dishes, rather than individual price per plate). Value bundling may also occur in the case of multiple purchases receiving a better negotiated price.

5.6 Promotion

Promotion was the other weak marketing strategy element in both regions. Some print advertising and trade/tourism publication advertising is common in both regions. Advertising appeals appear slightly more effective for the New York/Vermont antique stores. However, broadcast advertising, internet advertising and special promotions are not commonly used. Quebec antique stores are more likely to use outdoor signage and billboards than New York/Vermont establishments.

5.7 Personal Selling

Antique stores appear to rely on personal selling variables as their major form of promotion, especially in Quebec, where this variable received the highest rating. Quebec staff is more likely to approach the customers when they enter the antique shop, they are more likely to offer help and provide effective help to customers who are looking for something specific, or have questions about an item. They tend to be more knowledgeable about the merchandise, showcase/highlight special features, and try to make the sale than New York/Vermont staff. They are also more aware of and respond to nonverbal cues of their customers, while New York/Vermont staff tends to be better listeners to the clients' needs and wants.

6. Discussion

Overall, Quebec antique shops appear to implement more developed marketing strategies than New York/Vermont establishments in these rural tourism destinations. Both regions tend to have weaker pricing and promotion strategies. Antiques/collectibles prices are lower in New York/Vermont than in Quebec in general, although this cannot be compared directly since most products vary widely from shop to shop. What can be said is that the overall prices in the stores appear to be lower and more attractive to consumers in the New York/Vermont stores than in the Quebec shops, even taking exchange rates into consideration.

Since Quebec shops appear to carry higher quality merchandise, their higher prices may reflect the product quality. Prices are often negotiable in antique shops. It is possible that prices are more frequently negotiated in Quebec than in New York/Vermont, so the shops state higher initial prices.

Other than negotiation, there appear to be few price-related promotions such as coupons or discounts, in both regions. A small discount or coupon on one purchased item (with exclusions for certain product categories or with maximum value) may be a small incentive to draw new customers into an antique shop. This may be printed in a tourism guide, a rack card displayed in an information center, or on the antique shop web site. They may also be distributed through other retail stores or restaurants in close proximity while the antique store reciprocates by carrying the restaurant or retail store coupons in their establishments. Value bundling can also increase the sales volume by encouraging consumers to buy multiple items at a more attractive price rather than individual pieces at higher prices. This might apply to sets of china, crystal, silver, books, etc.

With respect to media promotion strategy, antique shops in both regions appear to rely on repeat customers and walk-in tourists who happen to drive by or walk by. Some shops run occasional print ads in local newspapers and magazines on a seasonal basis. Quebec antique shops are more likely to use other forms of advertising, such as rack brochures, ads in tourist guides, and on their website. They also use more outdoor signage on their shop, and on the road. As one would expect, broadcast media are infrequently used in both regions because they are expensive and less likely to reach the target audience.

Quebec antique shops rely on personal selling to promote their merchandise and to generate repeat customers. They are skilled at approaching the customers, helping them find what they are looking for, presenting the merchandise and making the sale. They are very knowledgeable about their products and empathizing with the customers. They carry good selections of products of a higher quality and offer good service. However, they could improve their hours of operations to be more customer-friendly. They could also improve their store atmospherics by managing the scent (e.g., ventilation to control dusty/musty smell, fragrance management), add more color (e.g., wall color, use colorful accessories, or color themes sections).

New York/Vermont antique shops could improve their personal selling by greeting the customers when they enter the premises, telling the customers to ask if they need any help, and if they appear to be looking for something specific, help them find similar items. They can tell them about the piece and be more proactive in closing the sale (e.g., "would you like me to put that on the counter for you while you continue browsing?"). While they appear to have good listening skills, they can be more conscious of nonverbal cues of their customers.

Some customers prefer browsing alone and should be greeted and left to explore on their own. Others may want more help and information about different items and the staff should be attentive to their needs. The antique shops can be more selective regarding the selection of antiques and collectibles they carry and avoid mixing in too much of the low-end "junk" that might depreciate the whole offering. The external curb appeal of the shop can be spruced up and the inside of the store cleaned and dusted at a low cost to the owner. The layout can be improved by making it easier to get around the aisles and displays, scent management, better signage, and better access to the disabled.

7. Conclusion and Future Research

Although it may be difficult to generate common themes among antique stores when it comes to various marketing mixes and strategies used, and similar studies can help shed light on how the antique trade affects rural tourism in specific local contexts. This study aimed at illustrating the differences and commonalities across the two rural platforms between the United States and Canada from the antique stores operating perspectives. Further research in this area may be needed that will explore the antiquing in rural tourism from the customers' perspective as to how the consumer behavior and other preferences affect this phenomenon in rural tourism. The implications of this study should be approached with caution due to its' limited sample size comparing two specific regions between the two countries. It may be beneficial to replicate the study in other specific prominent rural tourism regions with a bigger sample size.

This study only examined one province in Canada and two states in the U.S. More research is needed in other parts of these two countries to see if these findings apply.

In addition, a more quantitative approach to determine different market segments' preferences for different strategy variables, and determination of their reaction to different elements of the marketing strategy would be recommended for future research.

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