South African tour operators’ access to current consumer information

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The purpose of this study was to investigate the consumer-related information to which tour operators in South Africa have access. Data were obtained using a self-administered computer-aided questionnaire. This questionnaire was forwarded to 1000 tour operators, viewed by 360 tour operators, and a response rate of 42.45% was achieved. The results indicate that 68.4% strongly agree that their information systems are adequate while a mere 34.9% agree that their information systems provide them with consumer-related information. From this, it is evident that tour operators will not be in a position to satisfy the dynamic needs and wants of today’s tourists unless there is access to a comprehensive information system.

Key words: Tour operators, consumers, information systems, access, South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

A continual escalation in tourism figures recorded for South Africa has led to increased business opportunities for tour operators. Tour operators can become a formidable, influential force (Cavlek, 2002) and profit from this trend if they are knowledgeable about the changing needs of their consumers, because knowledge will “enhance their awareness of customer needs” (Huang and Hsu, 2009).

The key to success, according to Buhalis and Law (2008), “lies in the quick identification of consumer needs and in reaching potential clients with comprehensive, personalised and up-to-date products and services that satisfy those needs”.

The dynamic nature of the local and global tourism, business, and marketing environments directly influence tour operations and consumers, who are faced with constant change. Added to this is the challenge of applying “internal knowledge chain activities to gain external knowledge that will enhance…competitiveness” (Tseng, 2009). Information systems should enable management to access information and knowledge. If tour operators’ information systems do not provide such access, then the information systems should be updated. Tseng (2009) categorically states that “knowledge is a key element for survival” in today’s marketplace.

Regardless of the overload of consumer-related information, it is not known whether tour operators in South Africa do in fact have access to this information and/or whether their information systems should be updated to make information available as a tool for management decision-making. As tour operating and the relevant information systems are vast topics that cannot be covered comprehensively in a single study or paper, this paper sets out to provide insight into the following only:

i. To gain a better understanding of tour operators in South Africa in terms of four demographic descriptors: the type of tour operation they provide; the number of years they have been in existence; the size of their tour operations; and lastly, whether they have an information system.

ii. To determine the access tour operators have to

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consumer-related information.

iii. To identify the consumer-related information needs of tour operators and their willingness to update their information systems.

This paper starts with a review of the applicable background, followed by an explanation of the research methodology as well as a presentation of the findings. A discussion of the results follows, which leads to concluding remarks.

BACKGROUND

Tour operators should endeavour to ensure that their business operations are not only flexible but also adaptive, because, “if they do not they will not survive” (Skyrme, 2000) today’s intense global competitive business and marketing environments. The market (external) environment a tour operator needs to deal with comprises of variables such as competitors, consumers, intermediaries, publics, and suppliers (Wilson and Gilligan, 2005; Cant et al., 2006; Kotler et al., 2006). All of these variables influence a tour operator’s ability to provide value and ensure customer satisfaction (Kotler and Armstrong, 2004; Kotler et al., 2006). Tourism is a combination of the following sectors: accommodation; transportation; attractions; travel organisers [including tour operators]; and destination organisations (Bennett, 2000; Middleton and Clark, 2001; Middleton et al., 2009).

As a tourist’s perceptions and experiences are based on the collective entity of these variables, information on these variables is thus paramount.

Consumers are the basis of a tour operator’s existence, therefore, a tour operator will survive in business as long as the consumers’ wants and needs are satisfied. A detailed examination of the marketing environment forms an integral part of the situation analysis, market analysis, and the feasibility analysis processes, because detailed information needs to be collected concerning past, current, and potential consumers (Morrison, 2010). A number of years ago, it was said that information technology (IT) would enable enterprises, including tour operators, “to engage its customers in interactive communication” (Wells et al., 1999). These authors continue to state that enterprises will be “more successful if they concentrate on obtaining and maintaining a share of each customer rather than a share of the entire market.” Tour operators should at all times keep the following in mind: “sellers can be viewed as those who are selective about which consumer profile they choose to target, whereas consumers are selective about which products or services they purchase” (Van Scheers and Cant, 2007).

However, Khoo et al. (2002) advocate that a closer link between product re-innovation and consumer involvement should be established. With this in mind, they have developed a prototype customer-oriented information system (COIS) for product concept development. Consumer contact and relationship building alone are insufficient, according to Bove (2003), who explains that consumers should be seen as co-producers through participation. A later development has been in-depth tourism that is “a new travelling pattern which combines thematic experience and personal knowledge” (Chen et al., 2009).

Marketing is all about consumers, therefore, consumers should be the primary focus of any tour operation – finding them; satisfying them; and also, keeping them (Morgan 1996; George 2001, 2008). Tour operators should regularly assess and reassess their operations to determine what their consumers really want and their levels of satisfaction, and then base their new tourism offerings on these findings. This is why it is imperative that tour operators take consumer behaviour and all its influencing factors (cultural, social, personal, and psychological) into consideration. Added to this is the recommendation by Bassey et al. (2011) who state that the evolution of a proactive, dedicated and dynamic customer service system which is based on the needs, interests and preferences of customers is needed and that this should be based on “the best standards and tools to attain set corporate goals.” This involves disseminating consumer-related information to non-marketing managers and departments so that they also can incorporate this vital information into their knowledgebase, thereby understanding and being able to respond to the complex nature of the consumer (Korhonen-Sande, 2010). Tour operators will then be able to aim for customer loyalty as the source of their profitability and not customer satisfaction (Khokhar et al., 2011). An information system then has the potential to become an indispensable management tool.

It was professed at the turn of the twentieth century that the new approach in marketing would be relationship marketing (Czinkota et al., 2000), embodying a change from conquest marketing to consumer retention. Paulin (2003) explains that value can be created by “linking the customer and the organization through the building and managing of relationship networks.” Customer relationship management (CRM) can ensure competitive differentiation. Lin and Lee (2004) propose objective-oriented analysis methods for the development of a customer-relationship management information system (CRMIS) and a customer-knowledge management information system (CKMIS) (Lin, 2007). Coussement and Van den Poel (2008) have produced a model according to which tour operators can target their customer retention campaigns through a decision support system for churn prediction (predicting which customers are most likely to leave and targeting them with incentives).

Furthermore, priorities should be assigned to the allocation of those resources that will provide a competitive advantage through stronger relationships with fewer
consumers. Gök (2009) supports a new and more consumer-oriented approach to account portfolio analysis. In this consumers are sorted into groups and relevant strategies are developed for every group. Tour operators make many, or in some instances, all of their offerings available to the market via intermediaries. Bull (2010) opines that surprisingly little research has been done on how organisations use CRM systems to manage relationships with their consumers who make use of business intermediaries such as travel agencies. This most likely also applies to tour operations. A tour operator should be able to identify those intermediaries that do not make a positive contribution towards building a relationship with consumers. It is then advisable to rather terminate relations with such intermediaries.

Computer technology has changed and is still changing the way marketers/tour operators regard their consumers, consequently, this technology is taking the lead in the transition from mass marketing to database marketing. Wood (2001) indicates that small- and medium-sized tourism enterprises “make use of informal marketing information systems which mainly concentrate on internal and immediate operating environment data.” Further research reveals that “50% of small and medium size enterprises (SMEs) have some sort of web page, but very few actually take full advantage of the internet” (Buhalis, 2003). However, Migiro and Ocholla (2005) report that SMEs in the Durban area, South Africa, are more concerned with adopting IT to improve internal efficiency. Furthermore, tour operators specifically use IT for taking orders online. Computerisation and automation should enable a tour operator to gather and use information to form closer relationships with individual consumers. The acquisition and processing of information will enable a tour operator to customise appeals to and offerings for consumers – the epitome of the marketing concept. Customisation, according to Khoo et al. (2002), is “transforming customer information into specific product design.” This is where interactive marketing, combined with an effective customer information system, enters the playing field. The focus shifts to remembering what the consumer has said – so that tour operators can “personalize communications and customize product offerings” (Zahay and Peltier, 2007). The ideal is that the customer database is linked to and feeds into an information system.

It is imperative that tour operators are knowledgeable about their current and potential consumers and this call for a wealth of information. Not only should information be accumulated but it should be converted into knowledge to support and guide decision-makers. Information should also enable a tour operator to evaluate its operational performance and to identify “useful benchmarks for efficiency improvement” (Wu and Song, 2011). Buhalis (1998) advocates that information is “the lifeblood of tourism”; therefore, a strategic approach to the utilization of knowledge through technology should be adopted. Added to this is the rapid revolutionary change taking place in the domain of information and communications technology (ICT), and its impact on all aspects of the value chain of a tourist. Modern-day marketing is encapsulated in the provision of genuine consumer value. The smartphone market in South Africa is set to grow from 16 to 50% by 2015 but the “travel industry does not have the luxury of pointing to technological challenges at the consumer front” although, “research confirmed the growing appetite for fully-functional mobile services and highlighted some of the trends expected” (Zach, 2011). Smartphones, as part of ICT, can enable not only tour operators but most businesses involved in tourism to deliver value-added services. However, South African tour operators have not yet fully enjoyed the increased profitability associated with technological advancement and this can be a result of non-adoption, partial adoption or inappropriate adoption of the improved technologies” (Nzomoi et al., 2007). It is therefore essential that tour operators firstly “determine the level of readiness for change prior to the introduction of new IT/IS implementation by measuring its internal capabilities” and this could be done according to the proposed maturity model of Salleh et al. (2011), and this could also apply to tour operators on a national basis in South Africa.

Tour operators are caught up in a relentless process of procuring information, whether formally or informally. However, managers still tend to skim information instead of “taking a longer-term planned approach (strategically) to develop and improve customer information utilization” (Rollins et al., 2011). The process of awareness of what is happening in the marketplace can only be supported by a systematic and scientific formal procedure namely an information system. Such a system will facilitate the procurement of regular and planned information, analyse it and disseminate it to designated decision-makers (Zach, 2011).

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This is an empirical nomothetic descriptive study conducted in South Africa and it is based on the positivist philosophy. The purpose was to determine whether tour operators have access to consumer-related information. A quantitative survey was conducted and the research population included all tour operations in South Africa. The predetermined parameters were that 1) each sample unit had to be a South Africa tour operation and 2) each had to have some form of computerised information system during the course of the survey. An information system for this purpose could be any form of computerised data collection, ranging from an informal activity to formally acknowledged information systems. A population frame was assembled through acquiring names and contact information from various published and electronic sources. As there was no certainty that the list include all tour operations in South Africa, nor could it be confirmed that all those listed were operational at the time of the survey, a non-probability convenience
sampling method was employed.

The online web-based research tool used was QuestionPro.com and the research instrument was a web-based self-administered structured electronic questionnaire. QuestionPro.com’s licence agreement restricts the sample size to 1 000 successfully delivered e-mail invitations. In certain instances, an invitation could not be delivered electronically because of incorrect or terminated e-mail addresses. These were replaced with others from the sample frame until 1 000 had been delivered successfully. Two scheduled reminder e-mails were sent to sample members who did not respond to the original invitation or to the first reminder.

Each sample unit was sent a personal e-mail explaining the purpose of the study and an invitation to participate (data collection) by clicking on a hyperlink imbedded in the e-mail, that in turn activates the questionnaire. Once the questionnaire has been activated, ethical issues are firstly addressed and respondents have to supply their informed consent (this is compulsory validation questions) before gaining access to the actual questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of interacting branches where the question sequence is determined by respondents’ responses. The actual questionnaire commences with obtaining information regarding those descriptors selected for gaining a better understanding of the tour operators in South Africa. This section ends with a question on whether each respondent has an information system. Those who indicate that they do not have such a system are branched to the ‘Thank You’ page, seeing that they will not be able to respond to the questions in the remaining sections of the questionnaire. Various closed and ended questions, rating scales, and Likert scale questions with responses ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’ and ‘extremely important’ to ‘extremely unimportant’ are used to obtain the required information. The web-based research tool automatically captures responses to closed-ended questions into a database while responses to open-ended questions were nominally enumerated.

Sponsored prizes that were used to increase the response rate were obtained from: Rovos Rail, Wilderness Safaris, Bill Harrop’s Original Balloon Safaris, 1time Airline, Imperial Car Rental, and also Springbok Atlas. Questions were of such a nature that the prizes could not influence the outcome of the results.

RESULTS

The sample size comprised 1 000 successfully delivered e-mail invitations. The questionnaire was viewed by 360 respondents and 42.45% were submitted. It should be noted that the number of responses per question varied, because the only validation question was related to voluntary consent and not all the respondents responded to all the questions.

Descriptive statistics were recorded for every variable in order to understand the data and to be able to achieve the stated objectives. A cross analysis was performed on linked and test variables to determine how they compared. A uni-variate descriptive analysis was performed on all the original variables to obtain frequencies, percentages, cumulative frequencies, and also cumulative percentages. The following inferential statistics were used: cross-tabulations and chi-square based measures of association (if, in some cases, expected values of less than 5 in a cell occurred the Exact p-values were calculated); MANOVA and ANOVA (to assess the relationship between two or more dependent variables and classification variables), and also practical statistical significant tests and the Tukey’s Studentized Range (HSD) test (to determine which means differed from one other).

Participant description

All the responses of tour operators who started the questionnaire were recorded to obtain the participant description. Each tour operator was asked whether he/she had a computerised information system in use. The results indicate that 59.6% of the tour operators who responded do have such a system. Furthermore, the majority of them work for small tour operations (61.4% with up to five staff members); they focus on the international incoming market (69.9%); and 31.05% have been in business for up to five years with 31.05% between six and ten years, as indicated in Table 1. Further statistical analysis was performed. The results are indicated in Table 2.

The statistics do not indicate any statistically significant differences between the different types of tour operations, the number of years each tour operation has been in existence, or the size of the tour operation and the likelihood of having or not having an information system. It is recommended that the reasons for tour operators having or not having information systems should be explored in follow-up studies.

Tour operators who indicated that they had no information system were then branched out and the data are presented thus based on the responses obtained from those who indicated that they had information systems.

Access to consumer-related information

Tour operators were requested to indicate the internal information sources they utilize as a component of their information systems by responding either ‘Yes’ of ‘No’ to a list of sources. The results are indicated in Table 3. The table indicates that tour operators do make use of internal records and databases, and also information provided by customers as internal sources of information. Further statistical analysis indicates that there are no statistically significant differences between the size of a tour operation and the type of tour operation, as determinants of the internal information sources used by tour operators.

Tour operators rated market-related environment information on customers, suppliers, and competitors as ‘extremely important’ and ‘important’ (80.0%). Further statistical tests do not reveal any statistically significant differences between the size of the tour operation, the
Table 1. Research participant’s description.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
<th>Variance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information system</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size of tour operation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small (up to 5 staff)</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>61.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium (6 – 10 staff)</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large (11 and more)</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of tour operation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incoming</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>69.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outgoing</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years operational</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Up to 5</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 – 10 years</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 – 15 years</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 years and more</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Cross comparison for tour operators who do have an information system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>Chi square</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
<th>Exact test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of our operation</td>
<td>2.7058</td>
<td>0.4392</td>
<td>0.4392</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in existence</td>
<td>5.4092</td>
<td>0.1442</td>
<td>0.1457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size of tour operation</td>
<td>2.8409</td>
<td>0.2416</td>
<td>0.2411</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Internal information sources (%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal records and databases</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reservations and sales records</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information provided by customers</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing research</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other sources not listed</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tour operators indicate that their information systems provide them with consumer-related information, based on the responses received on a specific statement and the options ranged from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. The results obtained are illustrated in Figure 1. Based on the results obtained, tour operators indicate that they have access to customer-related information: ‘strongly agree’ (17.5%) and ‘agree’ (34.9%). However, it is alarming that 47.6% collectively are neutral and tend towards opposite views. This could spell disaster for tourism because consumer-related information is of the utmost importance, especially since today’s tourists prefer to be co-producers of their experiences.

Further statistics do not reveal any statistically
significant differences between the size of tour operations, type of tour operations, or the number of years in existence as determinants of the consumer-related information tour operators have access to, because all p-values are >0.05. These results are confirmed by the p-values of the Kruskal-Wallis Test results, as well as by the Hotelling-Lawley Trace test (size - p=0.2434; type - p=0.8308; years - p=0.7712).

### Information needs and willingness to adapt

Tour operators were requested to express their perceived information needs in an open-ended question and the responses were grouped according to the structure of the components of the marketing environment (the internal or micro-, the market-, and the macro marketing environments). Tour operators indicate that the sequence of information needed is as follows: market-environment-related information (40%). Here, information on consumers is cited frequently and includes trends, statistics, contact information, markets of origin, consumer preferences, spending patterns, and the profiles of consumers. This is followed by competitor-related information; and lastly, supplier-related information.

Tour operators were requested to indicate if they would support change in information systems. The model proposed is an information system that operates nationally from a central location. This information system is one example and it is derived from the TourMIS system and the Illinois Tourism Network (ITN). The results obtained indicate that 80% of the tour operators who responded to this question would support such a comprehensive information system. Tour operators were then requested to provide the reasons for and/or against supporting such an information system and the results obtained are indicated in Table 4.

Tour operators would support a comprehensive information system that operates nationally from a central location, because such a system would be easy to access (39%) and it is likely to contain quality, up-to-dated and cost-effective information. Such a system is also viewed by tour operators as beneficial as it could lead to new/increased business opportunities and markets (32%), as well as a co-operative tourism industry throughout South Africa while enabling global connectivity. The least frequent reason cited for tour operators supporting such a system is based on time and money (29%). The reasons put forward by tour operators who indicated that they would not support such information system, are that such an information system would not add value to their current business (71%). This is followed by the threat posed to the security and the confidentiality of their records and information (29%).

### DISCUSSION

South African tour operators have the potential to be a formidable force in the tourism industry and they will be able to ensure business success, if they are knowledgeable about their consumers. This knowledge can be supplied by an information system that serves as a tool in management decision-making. Based on the results presented, it is uncertain whether the current information systems of tour operators do in fact provide them with sufficient consumer-related information or whether these systems are able to process this information into easily accessible format. Establishing a national information system is crucial because if the current state of affairs is allowed to continue South African tour operators may be excluded from exploring potentially viable opportunities in the tourism market, not only domestically, but also globally. It is imperative that tour operators prioritise proper access to up-to-date consumer-related information as an investment (a business asset that is strategically managed), and to incorporate this into their business planning seeing that the introduction of new offerings is influenced by conducting environmental scanning.

Out of all the tour operators who participated in this study, 40.6% of them indicated that they have no form or type of information system, although they are part of today’s business and global environment, known as the information era. Most of the tour operators in South Africa operate in small businesses (with up to 5 staff members). This could account for the fact that there are still so many tour operators who do not have any form or type of information system. Van Sceers and Radipere (2007) conducted a research and found that nearly 29% of small business owners in the Pretoria are “constantly involved in marketing. The rest of the respondents never or hardly ever market their business, or do not know what marketing is.” Could it be a case of tour operators in South Africa do not have the finances to invest in either technology (capital) or know-how (human resources)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For adoption</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saving time and money</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy access with quality info</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Added business</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitor info</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Against adoption</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would not add value to business</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security and confidentiality</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Reasons for/against an innovated information system (%).
But, can they afford not to invest? It would be interesting to see how many of these tour operators are still in business in five years’ time. Added to this is the fact that almost 70% of the tour operators have to deal with international tourists, who in all probability are at worst acquainted with and at best, utilize technology themselves.

No statistically significant differences can be detected between the different tour operation descriptors, and whether or not, they do or do not have an information system. From this, it can be inferred that access to a comprehensive information system will be beneficial to all tour operators, irrespective of its type, size, or the number of years it has been in existence.

The subsequent discussion is based on only the responses received from tour operators who indicate that they do have some form or type of information system. It is of concern that 47.6% of these tour operators indicate that their information systems do not provide them with consumer-related information. A significantly high percentage indicates that they use spreadsheets as their main type of software in their tour operations. This type of software provides tour operators with the identity of consumers, but it cannot transform simple records into meaningful information and knowledge. There is thus an urgent need for IT training in the tour operating environment, which in all probability applies to the entire tourism industry in South Africa.

No statistically significant differences can be detected between the different tour operation descriptors, and whether or not their information systems provide them with consumer-related information they could use for management decision-making purposes. From this, it can be inferred that access to a comprehensive information system will be beneficial to all tour operators, irrespective of their type, size, or the number of years they have been in existence.

It is not surprising that the information needs tour operators express relates to the market environment within which they operate, because the information they are able to obtain from their information systems is hopelessly inadequate. This focus of this paper is on consumer-related information; therefore, it does not include an analysis of the other variables in the market environment. It is coincidental that tour operators list market-environment-related information as their most critical information need. The type of information listed as critical centres on consumer-related information that an information system will be able to provide. This confirms that access to a dedicated information system is of utmost importance, because consumer reservation and transaction records are not inadequate because information and knowledge needed for management decision-making should be available.

The information needs of tour operators are in line with their need for access to a comprehensive information system. A specific model of an information system has been proposed for use by tour operators, because IT innovation in itself is a vast topic and can include almost anything. Both TourMIS and ITN are public-private partnership systems. These are interconnected and integrated information systems in which all role-players (members) contribute by capturing their data online. The data are then collectively processed and members can acquire requested information. This infers that such an information system will be adopted by role-players in the South African tourism industry because it would enable them to obtain information in a user-friendly format. This is in strong contrast to the meagre records tour operators currently have on their personal computers. The tour operators’ biggest concern, that such a system will not add value to their current businesses, can be turned into a major benefit once the value of such a system is fully understood.

**Conclusion**

Tourism and information technology are dynamic in nature, therefore, tour operators ought to have the necessary information systems in place that will continually enable them to align business practices with developments and trends in the market. One of the prerequisites for conducting successful modern day tourism business is to have technology that is compatible with that utilized by the target market. This is especially relevant if tour operators wish to establish a two-way flow of information to build relationships and to establish loyalty among their consumers. This does not even include the establishment of databases for direct marketing purposes. Undertaking information system research and introducing innovation will be beneficial to the tourism industry. Access to consumer-related information could also contribute towards establishing South Africa as a preferred destination in the global tourism market.

Conclusions drawn in this paper in all probability have relevance to travel agencies, as well as other sectors of tourism. Research is imperative because access to meaningful information systems is of the utmost importance. However, multi-disciplinary involvement, such as input by system engineers and IT specialists, would be needed to enable tour operators to understand and place the consumer in their target markets.

Ritchie and Ritchie (2002) have proposed guidelines for the establishment of a comprehensive, state/provincial destination marketing information system (DMIS) for the tourism industry in Alberta, Canada. A similar information system would be beneficial for tourism in South Africa.

South African tour operators, on their own, will in all probability, not be able to raise the capital needed to acquire, develop, and then to maintain sophisticated
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