

Consumer Perceptions of Minnesota's Tourism Regions – Summary

Minnesota recently contracted with Strategic Marketing & Research, Inc. (SMARI) for a consumer-based "regional positioning study", looking at whether Minnesota's regional configuration, names, etc. work for consumers. An over-reaching question was whether consumers prefer having tourism regions over not having tourism regions.

Minnesota has been divided into the same four tourism regions for more than two decades. Three of the four regions have geographic names – Northeast, Northcentral/West and Southern – with (Twin Cities) Metro region serving as the exception. As in many other states, Minnesota's regions serve roles in both administering tourism programs and in marketing. Each region also has a corresponding industry association. Within regions, various sub-regional configurations have been used over the years, primarily to help organize information in travel brochures and on Minnesota's consumer website, www.exploreminnesota.com.

The study employed online focus groups in four separate markets. Each group spanned a three-day period, with a total of 83 participants completing a variety of tasks and answering questions they found when they logged on. A moderator directed each group's activity and participants were able to see and respond to each others' responses and comments, similar to traditional focus group. The online format focused on state tourism websites. Consequently, results most directly apply to regions as they are represented and utilized on state tourism websites. This was a good fit for Minnesota since, like many destinations, Minnesota is seeing increased utilization of its website for travel planning.

The study's conclusions included: having regions is better than not having regions; Minnesota's current regional boundaries do not adequately portray the diversity of Minnesota's travel product; meaningful and recognizable thematic names are preferable to geographic names; four regions is too few and 30 sub-regions is too many; when gathering travel information, regions play a different role for familiar versus unfamiliar visitors.

Participants' initial reactions did not point toward a strong need for regions. Consumers don't typically think in regional terms as they start looking for travel information. Rather, they are often looking for information about a particular city, or for destinations that feature a specific activity. However, it became clear that regional tools were of value, especially for familiar visitors as they got deeper into the information gathering process and wanted to find other things to see and do while "in the area". By contrast, for unfamiliar visitors, regions help participants learn more about a state and increase interest in new areas. In either case, participants preferred having information available on a regional basis, as opposed to not having regions at all.

Regional breakdowns worked best when regions were organized around themes or attractions that piqued participants' interest and gave them a sense of what they'd find there. The study revealed only 10 states that don't organize their travel products by some type of regional breakdown, likely reinforcing consumers' expectations that this is the

way things are organized in the world of tourism. Participants stressed the importance of maps in helping provide a sense of what each region encompasses.

As a follow-up to the study, Explore Minnesota Tourism has formed an industry task force that is charged with recommending changes to Minnesota's tourism regions, taking into account consumers' preferences identified in the study. The goal is to gain consensus on new regional breakouts in time to use them in the 2009 statewide travel guide. It is not clear to what extent administrative regions will change to align with new consumer-oriented regions.

If you would like to a copy of the final report, e-mail Pat Simmons of Explore Minnesota Tourism, at patrick.simmons@state.mn.us with "Regional Report" in the subject line.