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Corporate Social Responsibility in the U.S. Travel Industry

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Abstract (250 words)
As the travel industry consists of various sectors, which often depend on
environmental and cultural resources, socially responsible business policies, programs
and practices are essential to achieve sustainable tourism at the local as well as the global
level. Nonetheless, it has yet to be known how the industry perceives and practices
corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities. Thus, this study aims to better understand
the opinions about and engagement in (CSR) by the U.S. travel industry. Results of a
survey conducted to the members of Travel Industry Association of America can provide
travel companies with an important reference point about the concept of and practices of
CSR by the industry members. Moreover, results of this study will reveal areas for
further research.

1. Significance of the Study

Developing and managing tourism in a sustainable way has become an important
issue worldwide. To accomplish sustainable tourism, each member of the industry needs
to be ethical and responsible in its business practices taking into consideration the bigger

perspective of society's wellbeing. Conducting business activities aligned with society's wellbeing is referred to corporate social responsibility (CSR). The importance of CSR by the travel industry has gained importance in recent years because of rising concerns about the environmental issues of degradation, global warming, and depletion of natural resources. CSR seems particularly relevant to the travel industry, since the travel industry is reliant on environmental and cultural resources for its success. To date, however, knowledge of how the industry perceives CSR and how it embraces CSR activities in operations and management is lacking. Thus, the purposes of this study are to understand the U.S. travel industry's opinions about, and current engagement in CSR by members of Travel Industry Association of America.

2. Literature Review

The concept of CSR has evolved since the 1950s (Carroll, 1999). Although there are many definitions of CSR, it usually refers to companies' activities (e.g., policies and programs) that contribute to the society's good, beyond self-interests to the company and shareholders and legal requirements (Engardio, 2007; McWilliams & Siegel, 2001). These activities include "issues related to business ethics, community investment, environmental concerns, governance, human rights, the marketplace as well as the workplace" (Tsoutsoura, 2004, p. 3).

CSR has been part of travel industry practice, in conjunction with an increasing emphasis on sustainable tourism development and management. Many sectors of the travel industry (airlines, hotels), have recognized the impacts of CSR on their businesses. For instance, Henderson (2007) observed that the responses of hotel companies in Phuket, Thailand to the 2004 Tsunami coincided with sustainable business practices. This overlap of sustainability issues with CSR in tourism was also discussed at the 2006 Business Enterprises for Sustainable Travel Education Network Think Tank conference (Bergkvist, 2006). The Think Tank included research on CSR in different sectors of the travel industry such as: airlines, hotels museums, film tourism and destinations. Findings pointed to initial efforts in most sectors with a call for more comprehensive attempts to engage all stakeholders in the CSR activities of travel firms. The ability for CSR to create social capital and the need more monitoring and accountability of CSR activities were key conclusions.

3. Methodology

A questionnaire was developed and distributed to the members of Travel Industry Association of America (TIA) in late 2007. A total of 274 members completed the survey representing about 7% of the membership of TIA. The survey questions included: whether or not they are practicing CSR; the reasons for engaging or not engaging in CSR activities; which phrases they associate with CSR; how they perceive CSR (e.g., if CSR is a responsibility of the travel industry, if CSR is more important to the travel industry than to other industries, etc.). *(Note: Data analysis is in process and the completed results will be presented at the conference).*

4. Practical Applications

Findings of this study will provide travel/tourism/hospitality companies with an important reference point about CSR. As this study focuses on the travel industry, which

has rarely been done before, it will provide insight for travel/tourism/hospitality companies on how travel industry firms in the U.S. perceive and practice CSR.

Moreover, results of this study will reveal areas where further research is needed. For example, the preliminary results revealed that the survey respondents associated CSR with the word, "vague" the most (78.5%), while they also associated with ethical (72.6%), long-run (66.4%), mutually beneficial (60.6%) and so forth. Respondents also highly agreed that CSR is particularly important for the travel industry because it is so dependent on the destination's environment and society, and that CSR is more important now than ever before. These findings imply the urgent need for clear conceptualization and directions for CSR engagement for the travel industry.

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