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Motel Marketing Strategies in Quebec, Ontario, and New York

A Comparative Exploratory Study

**James Csipak and
Lise Heroux**

Cross-border travel is alive and well between Canada and the United States. Canadians in general choose the U.S. as their top travel destination. According to Statistics Canada (2004), they made a total of 34.2 million visits, bringing \$10.9 billion into the U.S. economy in 2003. The top three states visited are consistently Florida, California, and New York. New York is the preferred destination state for both Ontario and Quebec, according to VISITUSA (2000). Locally, Clinton County in northeastern New York received \$253 million in foreign travel and tourism in 1999, almost entirely from Canadian tourists, according to the North Country Chamber of Commerce.

Canada is a popular travel destination for Americans also. According to Statistics Canada (2004), 35.5 million visitors from the United States came to Canada, representing \$9.0 billion in tourism receipts in 2003. Ontario and Quebec were the preferred destination provinces; they were also the most popular travel destinations for Canadians traveling within their own country (Statistics Canada, 2000).

Literature Review

The hospitality industry benefits from several comparative studies conducted in Canada and the United States in recent years. The comparison of Canadian and American travellers' importance ratings of hotel selection criteria suggests significant similarity in their evaluation of hotels, according to Church and Heroux (1999),

whose study showed that Canadian and American travellers both consider cleanliness to be their most important choice criterion when selecting a motel. That is consistent with earlier studies by Taninecz (1990), McCleary and Weaver (1992), Martin and Lawlor (1996), and others. Church and Heroux's study also demonstrated that Canadian and American travellers rank similarly the importance (from most important to least important) of customer service, room prices, location, overall feel/look of the room, hotel appearance from the road, restaurant, free breakfast, bar, swimming pool, and exercise room. Church and Heroux (1999) also found that both Canadian and American travellers are likely to be loyal to a hotel and to select a hotel where they have previously stayed than to select another hotel.

Since the choice criteria measured in that study were broad, macro-level attributes of hotels, it may be that such variables are more universally understood and valued similarly across cultures. If such is the case, then similar marketing strategies might be successful in North America. Whereas Canadian and Americans might value macro-level hotel attributes (such as cleanliness or customer service) similarly, there might be more substantial differences between both groups as to how those variables are implemented on a micro-level. For example, Canadian and American travellers may agree completely on the importance of customer service, but they may have different preferences regarding how that service is rendered. This implies that, although a similar marketing strategy may be used in both markets, the marketing tactics might have to be adapted to each market.



B&B Chez Jean et Nicole in Kamouraska, Québec.

Photo : www3.sympatico.ca/titesouris/gite.html

In a descriptive comparative study of Bed-and-Breakfasts in Canada and the United States, Heroux and Burns (2000) found that there were more similarities than differences in the marketing strategies implemented by the establishments on both sides of the border. The study also showed that the overall marketing strategy scores were closely similar for Quebec, Ontario, and the United States, indicating that the B&B establishments in the three regions have identified their target markets and have designed marketing strategies that successfully meet their needs. Still, the American B&Bs appeared to do it just a little better.

Some of the observations suggested that American B&Bs have more specific target markets than Canadian establishments. They offer a wider variety of accompanying products, such as larger and more decorative rooms, and an expansive array of specialty features such as ski packages. Quebec B&Bs' locations were found to be more attractive, whereas Ontario B&Bs' atmosphere, cleanliness, and furnishings were more attractive. Pricing was similar for all regions, but Ontario



B&Bs rated higher on promotion because of their greater use of technology, their professional attitude, attire, and ability to communicate in English or French with their guests. B&B owners generated numerous repeat stays and loyal customers through their successful marketing strategies specifically adapted to their target markets.

In another hospitality-related study, Heroux (2002) found that restaurants in Quebec, Ontario, and New York State use very similar marketing strategies. For restaurants as a whole, the strongest variables were Place (e.g., internal atmosphere, favourable location) and Product/Service (e.g., menu selection, customer service). The weaker variables were Promotion (e.g., inadequate advertising) and Price (e.g., lack of value bundling or discounts).



B&B Chez Choinière in Saint-Simon (Trois-Pistoles), Québec.
Photo : Benoit Beaudoin

Purpose of the Study

The successful marketing strategy of motels requires the owner to identify a target market and develop a marketing mix (product/service, place, price, promotion) that will best satisfy the needs of that target market. The objective of the research was to investigate whether there were any differences in the marketing strategies implemented by motel establishments in reaching similar target markets in Quebec, Ontario, and New York State.

Methodology

This exploratory study, using 48 case studies, was undertaken in the contiguous regions of southwestern Quebec, south-eastern Ontario, and northeastern New York, region where substantial economic integration and cross-border traffic exist between the two countries, and where the hospitality industry targets business and leisure travellers of both nationalities (Church and Heroux, 1999). We conducted a census of motel establishments in that cross-border region and selected a census of all motels in three small cities for inclusion in the research. Of the 48 selected establishments, 16 were from Quebec, 16 from Ontario, and 16 from New York. International marketing stu-

TABLE 1 : Summary of the Marketing Strategy Variables Evaluation Grid	
Target market variables	Age, education level, income level, occupation, language spoken, customer loyalty, geographic proximity of target market, overall evaluation.
Product variety variables	Breadth of product line, assortment of accompanying products, size variations, quality, private labels/brands, special features, overall evaluation.
Service variables	Customer services, customized/standardized, credit cards, empathy, reservations (computerization), hours of operation, guarantees, customer satisfaction (complaint handling), overall evaluation.
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.
Establishment design	Interior layout (free form, grid, racetrack); atmospherics—scent, lighting, colour, mirrors, music, noise, signage; fixtures; cleanliness; size of crowds; type of clientele; access to disabled; overall evaluation.
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.
Promotion 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.
Personal selling variables	Customer approach, helpfulness, presentation of product/service, making the sale, knowledgeable, art of listening, verbal/non-verbal cues, general appearance of staff, overall evaluation.
Overall marketing strategy evaluation	Addition of the overall rating in the eight categories.



Room, B&B Chez Choinière in Saint-Simon (Trois-Pistoles), Québec.
Photo : Benoit Beaudoin

dents conducted the observational research. Table 1 presents a detailed marketing strategy evaluation grid.

Each establishment was visited by three observers who took detailed notes on how each marketing strategy variable was implemented. The three observers were then required to agree on a score (on a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 represents superior implementation of the strategy) for each variable, in an attempt to quantify the observational data. The comparison framework therefore consists of three cultural/geographic regions, eight marketing variable ratings, plus one overall strategy score.

Research Results

In this section, we discuss the qualitative and quantitative evaluation of each category of variables and present the similarities and differences observed from one region to the other.

Target Markets

All motels were frequented by a diverse clientele. Guests tended to be 18-65 years of age, with an emphasis on the 30-50 age group, and few senior citizens in the three regions. They also tended to be college-educated with a middle-class income. New York motels had more lower-income clients than Canadian motels in general, and Quebec motels had the greatest proportion of higher-income clients. A variety of customers were represented in the different regions. New York motels had more

business travellers, whereas Quebec motels had more families and tourists, while Ontario establishments had a mix of clients. In terms of the language of the clientele, the distribution varied by region, as could be expected: 25 % of Quebec motels served mostly French-speaking customers while 75 % served a mix of French- and English-speaking customers; 25 % of Ontario motels served mostly English-speaking clients while 75 % served a mix of French- and English-speaking customers; and 75 % of New York motels served mostly English-speaking customers while 25 % served a mix of French- and English-speaking clients. All motels, however, had a large proportion of repeat customers who came equally from a close or wide radius, that which is consistent with Church and Heroux's findings (1999) as well as Heroux and Burns' (2000).

Product Variety

In most cases, in all three regions, only standard rooms (single or double) were available, with similar amenities (e.g., television, air-conditioning). In the United States, the smoking/non-smoking option was available more often than in Canada. Room quality (e.g., bed, bedding, furniture) was rated as average/good both in Quebec and Ontario, with little variation (only one or two high- or low-quality motels in both regions), whereas the quality level was equally distributed in terms of low-, average-, or high-quality in New York. In terms of availability of products in the rooms (e.g., soap, shampoo, coffee), few were national brand name products. The majority was generic and only a few bore the motel's private label.

In all three regions a variety of special features were found in different motels. Indoor pools were more frequently found in American motels, whereas outdoor pools were more often found in Quebec motels, and few pools at all were found in the Ontario motels visited. Exercise rooms were found in more New York motels than Canadian motels, whereas bars were more often found in Quebec motels than any others. A few motels in each region had Jacuzzi rooms, restaur-

rants, dry cleaning service, complimentary continental breakfast, computer ports, conference rooms, and complimentary newspapers. Some unique services were offered in specific motels. For example, one New York motel offered babysitting services and another had suites available. In Quebec, one motel had fax copier service, and two motels had a VCR in each room. In Ontario, one motel had a gift shop and travel maps, one had hotplates in the rooms, and another had VCRs and rental videos.

Services

The hours of operation were similar in most of the motels (24 hours/7 days a week). Only in New York did several (25 %) of the motels have limited hours of operation. Reservations were encouraged but not mandatory. Computerized reservations were more frequent in New York than Canada. All motels in all regions accepted all major credit cards. In all regions, satisfaction guarantees were stated in only half of the establishments, and complaints were handled on an individual basis by the manager. Services were more often standardized than customized, although customization is more common in New York. Overall, there was a similar level of empathy from the motel employees toward the customers in all three regions.

Place

Most motels in all regions were located on primary roads and easy to find. There were a few more motels located on secondary roads in Ontario than in the other regions. The majority was also easily accessible from the road and offered ample parking for the clientele. The motels were also located near their target market. About 75 % of the motels in each region were described by the observers as having a good/nice outside appearance, whereas the rest looked rundown or had a poor outside appearance.

Different cultures offered different atmospheres in the motels (see Table 2). The majority had no music playing in the lobby,



TABLE 2 : Motel Atmospheric Variables across Regions

	New York	Quebec	Ontario
Scent	Musty, smoke	Clean/neutral	Clean/neutral
Lighting	Adequate to bright	Dim or adequate	Adequate
Furniture style	Standard, good quality	Standard, good quality	Standard, poor quality
Use of colour	Soothing earth tones	Shades of green	White, mixed colours

was very quiet, and had no noise coming from crowds or the street. Ontario motels were rated as very clean most often, followed by New York and Quebec motels. New York motels had the most access to disabled customers, possibly due to more stringent laws in the U.S.

Price

Overall, Quebec rates were the lowest, whereas Ontario and New York rates were comparable. This is consistent with Heroux and Burns' findings (2000) in their Bed-and-Breakfast study. Only one quarter of the motels offered group reductions, AAA discounts, and free stays for children. A few accepted coupons and offered bundle pricing (e.g., the price of the room includes continental breakfast, or dinner and movie pass to local theatre, golf pass).

Promotion

In all three regions, approximately half of the motels advertised in the local newspapers; one fifth advertised in magazines and in the telephone directory, and one third placed ads in trade publications/tourism guidebooks. Approximately 25 % advertised on television and 25 % on the radio. The most popular type of advertising appeal in all regions appeared to be testimonials. Other types of appeals were mentioned, such as comparative appeals, informational appeals, and humour. Although telemarketing efforts were almost non-existent in all regions, one third of the motels promoted themselves on the Internet. Direct mail was used most in Ontario, followed by New York and Quebec. Billboards were used more frequently in New York than in Canada, as were sales. Other forms of sales promotion such as coupons and contests were generally less popular. Due

to the large amount of repeat business, many motels relied on past client experiences for future business, as well as walk-ins. As a result, not all motels actively promoted their establishment.

Prospective clients' decisions to stay at a particular motel, their level of satisfaction with the motel, or their probability of repeat stays may be greatly influenced by the qualifications of motel representatives. In all three regions, the motel office clerk was generally welcoming and friendly. However, in one third of the cases in New York and Quebec, and one fourth of the cases in Ontario, the observers noted that the staff was not very friendly. That was a significant number for establishments that purport to be in the "hospitality" industry. The office clerks were found to be most helpful in Quebec and Ontario. In all regions, the observers found that the office clerks presented themselves (e.g., dress, professional behaviour) and the motel amenities professionally to "make the sale." Most were very knowledgeable and listened carefully to the questions and requests of prospective clients. However, in a few cases, some degree of distrust or suspicion arose toward the observers in New York and in Ontario, but not in Quebec. In most cases, however, professional behaviour prevailed.

Evaluation of the Ratings

The successful marketing strategy of motels requires the owner to identify a target market and develop a marketing mix (product/service, place, price, promotion) that will best satisfy the needs of this target market. Although the overall ratings of the 48 motels were closely similar, New York motels seemed to perform better than Quebec and Ontario motels in that matter (see Table 3).



Auberge de la Sainte Paix, Tadoussac, Québec.

Photo : Benoit Beaudoin

The analysis of the qualitative data may explain some of the ratings variations. With respect to target markets, New York and Quebec motels appeared to have more specific target markets, namely business travellers and families/tourists respectively, whereas Ontario establishments had a mix of target markets. For product variety, New York motels scored above the others because, unlike Canadian establishments, they offered a wider variety of related products, such as suites, conference rooms, restaurants, continental breakfasts, and an array of specialty features from non-smoking rooms to golf packages.

TABLE 3 : Summary of Marketing Strategy Ratings

Marketing Strategy Variable Ratings	Ontario	Quebec	New York
Target market variables	25.7	23.3	23.9
Product variety variables	16.4	17.6	19.1
Service variables	22.5	24.5	24.9
Location variables	19.9	21.6	22.6
Establishment design	30.2	28.9	27.5
Pricing variables	15.7	15.7	17.9
Promotion variables	13.7	17.1	16.8
Personal selling variables	25.4	27.8	26.4
Overall marketing strategy	21.18	22.06	22.39



The factors that distinguished New York motels from Quebec and Ontario motels for service variables were the availability of more customized services for the clientele, and more frequent use of computerized reservations.

Ontario motels scored lower for location because more motels in this region were located on secondary roads than in the other regions. Furthermore, Ontario motels rated highest for establishment design because of their cleanliness, which is the most important evaluation criterion for motels (Church and Heroux, 1999). New York motels in this study were perceived as less clean, with musty or smoke smell, and decorated in earth tones or "dull" colours.

Pricing strategies were very similar for all three regions. New York scores were slightly higher because of their greater use of promotional discounts, group reductions, and bundle pricing. That may be due to the fact that these motels were located in a more competitive area than found in Quebec and Ontario.

The qualitative data did not suggest specific reason(s) for the higher promotion score for Quebec motels. It may be due to the quality of the advertising or type of appeals used, as opposed to the type and quantity of promotion, since the three regions were similar in that respect. They also made a similar use of the Internet for promotion. With respect to personal selling, Quebec motel staff out-rated the others due to their helpfulness, a more professional attitude (less suspicious of the observers), and ability to communicate in English or French with their guests.

Conclusion

As stated earlier, the overall marketing strategy scores were very close for Quebec, Ontario, and New York, indicating that the motels in the three regions have identified their target markets and have designed a marketing strategy to successfully meet their needs. However, New York motels appear to do it just a little better in their region.

It is interesting to note that many of the above ratings are consistent with those obtained by Heroux and Burns (2000) in their Bed-and-Breakfast study. For example, the higher ratings were consistent in both studies for product variables, service variables, establishment design, pricing variables, and the overall strategy ratings. Scores differed for target market variables, where American B&Bs scored highest because of *more specific* target markets, whereas Ontario motels scored highest because of a better *mix* of target markets. Scores also differed for location variables, where Quebec B&Bs rated highest for their location in pleasant rural areas, whereas American motels rated highest for their location on primary roads. Ontario B&Bs rated highest for greater use of technology related to promotion and their professional attitudes as regards personal selling, whereas Quebec motels rated highest, probably for the type and quality of advertising appeals and helpfulness in personal selling.

The results of this study suggest that similar marketing strategies may be used successfully in the hospitality industry in the three regions, with minor modifications in marketing tactics to accommodate regional conditions, as suggested by Church and Heroux (1999). Furthermore, as this study only examined two regions in Canada and two states in the U.S. More research should be conducted in other parts of these two countries in order to verify whether these findings would apply. In addition, a more quantitative approach to determine the preferences of the different market segments with regard to amenities, as well as the determination of their reaction to different elements of the marketing strategy would be recommended for future research.

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