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# Measuring the Effectiveness of Destination Marketing Campaigns: Comparative Analysis of Conversion Studies

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## Abstract

This article presents findings of a comparative study of destination marketing evaluation research in the United Kingdom to identify success factors, highlight best practices, and draw attention to determinants of poor performance in destination marketing campaign activities. Increasing levels of competition between tourism destinations has led to increased pressure on destination marketing organizations (DMOs) to maximize the effectiveness of their marketing spend. Therefore, the evaluation of tourism marketing campaigns reveals not only if the campaign has been successful in terms of attracting visitors but also if the expectations in terms of expenditure impact and return on investment are achieved. This study investigates the success of 18 campaigns directed to potential domestic visitors, using the conversion study technique to evaluate expenditure impact and return on investment. This article contributes to marketing practice through increased understanding of the key components that lead to a high return on investment and higher impact.

## Keywords

destination marketing evaluation, conversion methodology, domestic tourism, United Kingdom

Tourism destination marketing is one of the most influential means of increasing numbers of visitors to a destination and maintaining stays within a destination. The work of destination marketing organizations (DMOs) in coordinating and complementing private sector marketing activities and in developing and representing an “official” image for the destination region delivers a proven model for tourism destination marketing (Pike 2004). However, DMOs’ expenditure on marketing activities has been subject to recent debate and the question of effectiveness has become a key issue, critically in terms of evaluating if and how the marketing works to affect visitor behavior. Specifically, destinations need to know if visitor numbers and spending can be linked directly to marketing campaign activity. This has become a critical issue where many destinations are facing considerable pressure on both capital and revenue budgets as public sector funding of the tourism sector comes under scrutiny (Fyall, Fletcher, and Spyriadis 2007), and in light of an increasing number of destinations, all producing competitive marketing activities directed toward a limited tourism market. This is further compounded by structural changes in marketing. Xiang and Petrick (2008) argue that tourism has adopted some paradigmatic shifts, including from transactional to relational marketing models, network

approaches to marketing, and a service dominant logic. These developments challenge the conventional roles and functions of consumers and marketing as consumers become coproducers of services and increasingly (online) marketers for destinations, and DMOs seek to perform a more traditional mediating role between consumers and a range of service providers. Although Fyall, Callod, and Edwards (2003) argue that despite issues of novelty-seeking affecting loyalty in the context of tourism destinations, there are still potential benefits from adopting a relationship marketing approach. Xiang and Petrick (2008) suggest that the focus of research should seek to “marketing productivity evaluation” (p. 241) which in addition to assessing return on investment, asks how DMOs can evaluate success in terms of customer learning and knowledge advancement, branding and positioning, and the role of the natural environment as a source of competitive advantage.

Hence, DMO managers are turning to a range of evaluation measures to assess the success of tourism marketing campaigns. Greater knowledge about the effectiveness of

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different campaigns or types of marketing could help government organizations and businesses to tailor their products, adapt their campaigns, identify relevant target markets, and potentially achieve greater benefits from marketing expenditures.

Several approaches have been proposed to assess the effectiveness of tourism marketing campaigns or advertisements. As Kim, Hwang, and Fesenmaier (2005) note, these approaches include conversion studies (Burke and Gitelson 1990; Woodside and Reid 1974), advertising tracking studies (Siegel and Ziff-Levine 1990), quasi-experiment (Mok 1990), and cross-sectional analysis (Silberman and Klock 1986). From the above-mentioned ways of evaluating the success of tourism marketing, conversion studies stand out as the most appropriate method, first used by Woodside and Reid (1974). The advantage of using the conversion methodology includes the straightforward implementation and interpretation of this approach, the richness of information obtained, and the usefulness to DMOs and other organizations. Conversion studies involve undertaking research, often based on questionnaires, to analyze whether recipients of destination marketing are converted to become visitors as a result of advertising messages (through requests for further information, bookings, and/or actual visits). Conversion studies return several impact measures such as costs and revenue per inquiry and rates of return on investment generated in different media or target markets. Conversion studies serve a different purpose than visitor survey studies and provide different estimates of both visitor characteristics and travel behaviors (Perdue and Botkin 1988). As Cai (1998) points out, conversion is more feasible than other approaches in that the cost of the study is relatively inexpensive. Further to that, conversion studies have been widely used by state, regional, and local tourism organizations in the United States (Burke and Gitelson 1990; McWilliams and Crompton 1997; Woodside 1990; Woodside and Sakai 2003), among other destinations.

In addition to conversion studies, advertising tracking studies have been used to evaluate the success of marketing campaigns. The advertising tracking approach consists of using consumer research to provide information about consumers' reactions at different stages of the marketing process, in contrast to conversion model's results for the final impact of marketing activity. Advertising tracking models are appropriate when the objective is to provide information about the process by which marketing activities build awareness of the destination recognizing that not all advertising performs a sales function, but can also aim to build positive imagery and/or associations of the destination over a longer time frame. The advertising tracking approach is also useful to evaluate satisfaction concerning inquiry fulfillment, shifts in attitude, cognitive knowledge, and travel intent toward a destination (Siegel and Ziff-Levine 1990). Econometric models (e.g., logit or probit models) have not been widely used to evaluate marketing campaigns. These models can provide detailed

information about potential tourists' responses to different types of marketing activities and can be used to examine tourists' behavior at a highly disaggregated level. These models can determine the likelihood (probability) that a person with particular socioeconomic characteristics will visit the destination after experiencing a particular type of marketing. Given the main purpose of the article, the conversion methodology is the most appropriate methodology, allowing the comparison of a significant number of marketing campaigns.

This article develops a methodology to compare different types of marketing campaign. The results from conversion studies of 18 domestic tourism marketing campaigns undertaken in the East Midlands region of the United Kingdom are used. Conversion studies were used because these campaigns are often specific to local areas or local attractions and often overlapped. An identical research methodology was used in all campaigns. This approach allows comparisons to be made between campaigns, paying special attention to their impact in terms of conversion rate (inquirers who traveled to the destination as a result of the travel information previously received), expenditure impact, and return on investment. The objectives of this research are to compare the results across campaigns to identify the key determinants of successful campaigns as well as to formulate recommendations to tourism organizations. For while most published research in this developing area of tourism marketing either focuses on theoretical or methodological issues involved or describes findings from single cases, there is relatively little research that looks across different campaigns. A key benefit of this approach is to identify critical success factors, areas of best practice, or indeed to make assertions about how (in this case the conversion) methodology can be used as a strategic tool by DMOs to channel and direct funding toward particular types of campaign or target markets. The article makes recommendations that inform practice in the sector and that also adds to knowledge about the usefulness of the conversion approach to the evaluation of marketing effectiveness in tourism.

## Evaluation Tools for Destination Marketing

Marketing managers are coming under increasing pressures to justify marketing spend in terms of return on investment. In the private sector, marketing communications activity can be more readily tracked within an organization in terms of increases in inquiries, bookings or sales volumes, brand equity, or other responses to activities since much marketing is directed specifically toward calls to action. However, in the public-private sector partnership organizations of the DMOs, it is more difficult to evaluate the impact of campaign activity that promotes a region or resort in totality. Shields (2006) has highlighted the lack of research at the state level into the impact of state-funded advertising for example. Destination tourism suppliers—hotels and the wider accommodation

sector, visitor attractions, and inbound travel agents and tour operators—may not conduct their own analyses of bookings and sales according to marketing campaigns, and DMOs have difficulty in coordinating the wider tourism industry sector to develop supply-side evaluation of the impact of destination-wide marketing activity. At the macroeconomic level, a lack of available data and also lack of adequate methods for evaluating the impact of marketing activity has until recently limited measurement of the effectiveness of marketing. Kulendran and Divisekera (2007) measure the effects of marketing spend at the national level by the Australian Tourism Commission, but this study shows that marketing activity at the local, regional, and national levels could all influence consumers' decisions.

Similarly, in respect of tourists' decision making, there has been widespread agreement that the factors affecting tourist decision making are many and varied, making it difficult to isolate the effects of marketing from a range of exogenous and endogenous variables (see, e.g., Sirakaya and Woodside 2005). Consumer decision-making theory has been hampered by consumers' irrationality and a propensity to rely on heuristics, limitations in the destination choice sets (Um and Crompton 1990), the influence of family and friends on travel decisions (Gitelson and Kerstetter 1994), and the processes of decisions that "are based on many variables in relationships that are interactive rather than linear" (Woodside and King 2001, p. 823). Despite these problems, DMOs rely on demand-side approaches to evaluate the impact of activity. This has led to numerous methodological approaches to create robust and rigorous methods of assessing the impact of marketing on consumer behavior.

Woodside (1981) states that conversion studies are most useful for comparing the relative performances of one advertisement or marketing campaign against another, with mail questionnaires being the most popular method. Conversion studies are well accepted internationally and are probably the most popular approach for studying the effectiveness and expenditure impact of tourism marketing (Silberman and Klock 1986; Woodside 1990). A range of DMOs, for example the Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism (McLemore and Mitchell 2001), Travel Montana (1998), Vermont Department of Travel and Tourism (Kuentzel 1993a, 1993b) and Virginia Tourism Corporation (VTC 2001), have implemented them across a spread of visitor markets and different media, from magazines (Travel Montana 1998), to telephone (Messmer and Johnson 1993), to tourism Web sites (Tierney 2000; McLemore and Mitchell 2001). In measuring return on investment from marketing campaigns, McWilliams and Crompton (1997) distinguish between advertising tracking studies and conversion studies. "The advertising tracking approach assumes that potential visitors may be 'converted' to purchase a tourism service solely on the basis of (advertising) awareness and image building impacts" (p. 129). The conversion study approach contains an inquiry or fulfillment component (in addition to

an awareness-raising function) where potential visitors actively request information from the DMO prior to visitation. Messmer and Johnson (1993) undertake research that compares the two types of methodologies and they conclude that conversion studies can avoid serious bias in the measurement of some advertising effects but that conversion studies cannot lead to an adequate measurement of incremental visitation because of advertising. Since advertising often functions to raise awareness and build destination image over the long term, there is potential difficulty in disaggregating this from tactical marketing activity. Conversion research aims to mitigate against other advertising through the research design (through questions on prior knowledge and visitation behavior and intentions) and through a focus on the direct effects of the inquiry or fulfillment approach.

However, previous literature on conversion studies has also pointed out some limitations of conversion study research, including failure to correct for nonresponse bias and incorrect sampling techniques (Silberman and Klock 1986; Butterfield, Deal, and Kubursi 1998). By their very nature, conversion studies focus on actual visits, neglecting to reflect the underlying behavioral processes in decision making and the role marketing plays in affecting a range of psychological and cognitive factors related to destination awareness and consideration (Kim, Hwang, and Fesenmaier 2005). Perdue and Gutske (1992) explore the impact of multiple trips on inquiry conversion research results; hence this research asks visitors not only whether they visited but how many times they visited. They find that allowing for multiple trips increased the estimate of total trips by 37%, length of stay by 39.4%, and total visitor expenditures by 34.7%. The lower response rate may be attributed to inquirers' knowledge of who was the brand sponsor of the research. Woodside and Dubelaar (2003) find that response rates to surveys mailed to conversion study respondents are lower when the brand sponsoring the research is identified versus not identified.

Conversion studies yield a conversion rate that is the percentage of inquirers who visit after being exposed to the direct response marketing campaign. This conversion ratio can be used to estimate effectiveness and efficiency ratios, expenditure impact, and return on investment (Burke and Lindblom 1989). One critical element in conversion studies involves visitor spending that is used in combination with the conversion rate to assess the expenditure impact of marketing efforts. A well-planned conversion study can also help to adjust expenditures across all electronic and print marketing channels. Despite the possible limitations of the conversion studies, it is a well-accepted method and a useful tool of marketing effectiveness measurement.

### *The Political Context of DMOs in the United Kingdom*

At the end of the 1990s in the United Kingdom, political devolution started to take shape and by the beginning of the

2000s, devolution had reached the area of tourism. In England, the government decided that devolving most of the responsibility for tourism development to the regional level would provide the best return on its expenditure as DMOs and destination management partnerships (DMPs) at the regional and local level better understand their products and markets (Fyall et al. 2007). Politically, regional tourism development currently comes under the remit of the Department of Trade and Industry, who fund the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), who themselves determine how much to allocate to tourism. This contrasts with the pre-2003 structure, when the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) was responsible for local- as well as national-level tourism strategy. As a result, the DCMS has limited ability to direct or even influence tourism strategy in England. There has been no increase in budget for VisitBritain in 10 years, which equates to more than a 20% reduction in real terms. Furthermore, an announcement in 2007 stated that DCMS's funding allocation to VisitBritain will be reduced by 18% from £49.6 million in 2007 to £40.6 million in 2010, and justified this partly because the emphasis of tourism funding has been transferred to the RDAs (House of Commons 2008).

The RDA under investigation in this research is the East Midlands Development Agency (EMDA). *Destination East Midlands*, published in 2003, set out the broad strategic direction foreseeing a network of DMPs to deliver at the sub-regional level (EMDA 2003). This model was then implemented by EMDA in 2004-2005 when it established East Midlands Tourism (EMT) as its regional tourism development body and established and accredited five DMPs (Derbyshire, Leicestershire & Rutland, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, and Nottinghamshire), with responsibility for the provision of services to both the industry and the visitor. Many of these organizations were already delivering tourism services under contract from the constituent local authorities. The East Midlands consists of six counties: Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire, and Rutland. The region covers an area of 15,008 square kilometers and has a population of 3,609,160.

## Method

The methodology used to estimate conversion rates, visitor expenditures, and hence return on investment is the same across 18 different campaigns. While the literature has outlined several limitations of using the conversion methodology as described in the literature review section of this article, the fact that these marketing campaigns are being evaluated using the same methodology allows an objective comparison between them, enabling policy makers to compare like with like.

### The Conversion Model

Rather than count the proportion of respondents who made a visit (the gross conversion rate), which inflates the impact of

a campaign by including those that are not "converted" into visitors by the marketing campaign (Ballman et al. 1984; Burke and Gitelson 1990), the net conversion rate (CR) is calculated by assigning a weight ( $W_i$ ) to each respondent  $i \in \{1 \dots N\}$  based on how they answered survey questions on if and when they booked a trip and the degree to which the marketing campaign influenced their choice:

$$CR = \sum_{i=1}^N W_i / N.$$

$W_i = 0$  for those respondents who did visit the destination but who had already booked their trip at the time of inquiring and for those who booked later but would have booked anyway. Other respondents were assigned weights as to how they answered the question "Did the information you received turn a possible visit into a certainty?" with possible answers *not at all* ( $W_i = 0$ ), *possibly* ( $W_i = .2$ ), *probably* ( $W_i = .5$ ), and *definitely* ( $W_i = 1$ ).

### Visitor Expenditures

Incremental spend as a direct result of the marketing campaign is derived from two segments. The first segment is those respondents who are converted to the destination as a direct result of the campaign (visitors), that is, tourists who visited the destination but had not booked or committed to a trip at the time of requesting the destination marketing material. The second segment is those visitors to the destination who had already booked or committed to a trip but who extended their stay in the destination as a direct result of campaign (extenders). Only the incremental expenditure for the extended part of this segment's trip will be included in the expenditure analysis. The proportion of respondents who extend their visit is  $PE = \sum_{i=1}^N X_i / N$ , where  $X_i$  is a weight given to those who responded that they were possibly ( $X_i = .2$ ), probably ( $X_i = .5$ ), or definitely ( $X_i = 1$ ) encouraged to extend their stay because of the marketing campaign. ( $X_i = 0$ ) for all those who had not booked or who were not already going to book a trip to the destination.

Incremental spend ( $T$ ) is a function of the conversion rate and average length of stay ( $L$ ) for those converted to visit the destination by the campaign, and the additional nights spent in the destination ( $A$ ) plus the proportion of respondents who extended their stay (PE) multiplied by the average number of additional nights ( $A$ ) for those who did extend their stay. The summation of these two terms is then multiplied by expenditure per day ( $E$ ), party size ( $S$ ), and the number of unique contacts ( $U$ ) who requested promotional materials.

$$T = (CR \times L + PE \times A) \times E \times S \times U.$$

Previous research has found that respondents differ from nonrespondents in their travel patterns and reaction to marketing



stimuli (i.e., nonrespondents are deemed less likely to have visited and to have been influenced) (Ellerbrock 1981; Burke and Gitelson 1990). Hence, an adjustment needs to be made to the incremental spend figures to allow for nonresponse bias. Little research has attempted to quantify (and apply) an adjustment to incremental spend figures. The most recent research to implement an adjustment in spend figures are Hunt and Dalton (1983) and Woodside and Ronkainen (1984). These researchers implement a 20% reduction in the incremental spend to allow for nonresponse bias. This decision rule is somewhat arbitrary, but in light of a more recent and accurate nonresponse bias adjustment, a reduction of 20% of the incremental spend will be implemented in this research. Further research is needed to update this decision rule. This reduces the total expenditures across all campaigns, but the relative success of one campaign compared with another remains the same.

Return on investment (ROI) is calculated as the incremental spend divided by all costs incurred by the campaign, which includes direct campaign costs and estimates of indirect costs borne by the DMP's staff time ( $ROI = .8 \times T / C$ ). While direct campaign costs, such as publicity materials and fees paid to companies for services, are relatively easy to calculate on a campaign basis, indirect costs are less easily attributable. The DMO in the study used here has taken great care to attribute the indirect costs of staff time to campaigns, but ultimately there is some degree to which the indirect costs will involve a greater margin of error than the direct costs. The return on investment notably counts every additional unit of spending as a benefit to the destination rather than trying to assess the economic impact of this expenditure, and should not be treated as net economic benefits. While the measurement of the net economic benefits of spending by different categories of tourists (Dwyer, Forsyth, and Spurr 2007; Dwyer, Forsyth, Fredline, et al. 2007) would be an important step to calculate a net return on investment, the necessary collection of data on expenditure by product would have reduced response rates, and given that there is no regional input-output data for the East Midlands to calibrate a model to assess net economic benefits, such an approach would not be feasible.

The return on investment will be higher if more unique contacts are produced per unit of cost, if fewer of these contacts have already booked or committed to a trip, if the marketing campaign is successful in turning possible visits into certainties, if visitors are convinced to extend their visit, and if lengths of stay, daily expenditures, and party sizes are higher.

### Sampling

The sampling frame for each campaign consists of all those contacts that responded to the marketing campaign's call to action. These potential visitors requested information from the DMPs, be it in the form of a visitor guide or other marketing materials, and provided their contact details. Allowing

potential visitors the time to plan and visit the destination before the evaluation takes place and noting the impact of memory on expenditures recall (Mak, Moncur, and Yonamine 1977; Zhou 2000), the evaluations took place approximately 6 months after the end of each marketing campaign. Contact records were carefully cleaned before a simple random sample of 1,500 contacts were selected to be surveyed, except for campaigns with less than 1,500 contacts, where the whole sampling frame were used, and two larger campaigns where 3,000 contacts were surveyed. Approximately 3 weeks after mail packs, including a one-page survey form and a prize draw entry form, were sent out, the data collection period ended.

The size of the marketing campaigns in terms of the number of contacts captured by the call-to-action mechanism varies significantly. The total number of unique contacts or inquiries from each campaign varies from 503 to more than 80,000, with the average number of contacts across the 18 campaigns being 13,705. The average response rate across the group of campaigns is 23.4%, with a high of 34.5% and a low of 16.7%. Overall, the response rate and number of completed surveys is satisfactory since it guarantees a maximum margin of error of  $\pm 7.3\%$  at a 95% level of confidence for the campaign with the fewest respondents.

### Questionnaire

The one-page questionnaire covered the following core areas used to calculate the conversion rates and return on investment: source of information regarding the DMP; situation at the time the respondent requested or sought the information; if the respondent chose to visit the destination during the past months; whether the respondent is likely to revisit the destination again during the next 6 months; influence of the marketing campaign in converting the visitor, operationalized by the question "Did the information you received turn a possible visit into a certainty?"; influence of the marketing campaign to extend the visit (for those visitors who had already booked their trip at the time they requested information), operationalized by the question "Do you think that contacting/requesting information encouraged you to stay extra days?"; and influence of the different marketing components to encourage a future visit, operationalized by the question "Do you think any of the following encouraged you to make future trips?" These three "influence" questions all used the same Likert-type scale as the response items, namely, definitely, probably, possibly, and not at all. Additional questions included the number of extra trips, total trip expenditure, length of stay, party size, and party composition.

Following Perdue and Gustke (1992), the questionnaires measured visitation by asking how many trips the respondent made rather than asking if the dichotomous question of whether the respondent visited the destination or not. A significant number of visitors made more than one trip to the destination. This affects total visitor expenditures. Perdue and

**Table 1.** Conversion Rates

Campaign No	Gross Conversion Rate, %	Already Booked or Committed, %	Marketing Influence, %			Net Conversion Rate, %
			Definitely	Probably	Possibly	
1	16	5	4	5	3	7
2	66	20	14	12	15	23
3	43	7	12	14	7	20
4	42	6	14	14	8	23
5	48	7	14	12	8	22
6	49	5	7	10	9	15
7	65	7	34	13	7	42
8	44	22	8	10	6	14
9	32	4	12	6	8	17
10	30	3	6	6	9	10
11	41	15	10	4	8	14
12	37	6	9	9	8	16
13	49	9	5	11	13	13
14	8	1	2	2	1	3
15	52	14	15	12	7	22
16	60	7	23	12	12	31
17	41	5	21	24	34	20
18	48	5	9	14	15	19

Botkin (1988) point out the importance of capturing visitor expenditure from a conversion study as opposed to using a proxy from a more general visitor study. They conclude that using visitor survey expenditure estimates with inquiry conversion data analysis is inappropriate as different results materialize for both visitor characteristics and travel behaviors from the two different methodologies. This finding has been confirmed across these studies where for example for campaign 5, the average per person per night expenditure in this conversion study, was estimated to be £49.02 compared to £56.67 as reported in VisitBritain's 2005 regional results for the East Midlands (from the United Kingdom Tourism Survey, a national consumer survey measuring the volume and value of domestic overnight tourism trips taken by residents of the United Kingdom).

### Measuring the Success of Marketing Campaigns

In measuring the success of a tourism marketing campaign, as outlined in the methodology section, there are a number of variables that can influence visitor expenditures. Similarly, there are a number of different ways to measure the success of a marketing campaign, including conversion rates, different measures of cost-effectiveness, and return on investment statistics. These figures are examined in turn.

#### Conversion Rates

High gross conversion rates do not necessarily lead to high net conversion rates. This is due to the intermitting factors

outlined in the Method section of this article, such as the proportion of visitors who had already booked or committed to a trip when they requested or sought information on the destination. These visitors most likely use the marketing material to plan their trip while in the destination. Similarly, net conversion rates may be low because of a lack of influence the marketing campaign has on their decision to visit. In these cases, other factors apart from the marketing have influenced their decision to visit the destination. The conversion rates of the different campaigns (Table 1) show both gross and net for the 18 campaigns as well as the percentage of visitors who had previously booked or committed to a trip and the degree of influence of the marketing campaign in driving destination visitation. The average gross conversion rate across the 18 campaigns is 43%, with an already booked or committed proportion average of 8% and an average net conversion rate of 18%. There are several interesting things to note: campaigns 2 and 7 have similar gross conversion rates (66% and 65% respectively) but campaign 7 has a much higher net conversion rate because of the high already booking percentage of campaign 2 (20%). Campaign 14 has the smallest decrease between gross and net conversion rates (5 points) while campaign 2 has the largest difference (43 points). The average discrepancy between gross and net conversion rates is 24 percentage points.

#### Cost-Effectiveness

Another way to evaluate the effectiveness is to examine the cost-effectiveness of a campaign. Across the 18 campaigns (Table 2), the average cost per visitor is £81.80 (where the

**Table 2.** Cost-effectiveness

Campaign No.	Cost (in £)	Cost per Visitor (in £)	Cost per Converted Visitor (in £)	Cost per Contact (in £)
1	24,000	3.7	15.4	2.5
2	57,000	15.8	46.3	10.5
3	34,000	26.9	57.8	11.5
4	162,888	13.2	24.7	5.6
5	107,469	24.5	53.1	11.7
6	30,000	48.9	155.0	23.7
7	26,250	48.7	74.5	31.4
8	130,346	9.4	29.0	4.2
9	145,350	86.1	160.4	27.1
10	50,000	106.3	310.6	32.0
11	153,000	92.0	276.9	38.1
12	127,000	64.0	154.0	23.9
13	11,100	44.8	164.7	22.1
14	50,000	840.7	2,140.0	70.6
15	181,450	12.4	29.2	6.4
16	330,778	6.7	13.0	4.1
17	106,374	17.1	35.3	7.0
18	80,844	11.5	28.8	5.5

number of visitors is the gross conversion rate applied to the total number of contacts) and the average cost per converted visitors is £209.40 (where the number of converted visitors is the net conversion rate applied to the total number of contacts). However, these averages are skewed by the results from campaign 14, where the cost per visitor is £840.70 and the cost per converted visitor is £2,140. Hence, it may be more appropriate to report the median figures. The median cost per visitor is £25.70 for the sample and the median cost per converted visitor is £55.50. Across the 18 campaigns, the cost per contact is £18.80 on average (median £11.60).

Campaign 1 is the most cost-effective campaign, being the most cost-effective on two measurements: costing only £3.70 for a single visitor and £2.50 for a potential visitor and the second most cost-effective for a converted visitor. Conversely, campaign 14 was the least cost-effective across the three measures: it cost £840.70 to capture a visitor, £2,104.00 to convert a visitor, and £70.60 to reach one potential visitor. Campaign 16 had the largest costs in absolute terms and was the second most cost-effective campaign on the cost per visitor and cost per contact measurements, yet campaign 8, whose campaign was the sixth most expensive in absolute terms performed relatively well on cost-effectiveness measures. This campaign cost £9.40 per visitor to the destination (ranking third most cost-effective), £29.00 per converted visitor (ranking fifth), and £4.20 per contact (ranking third).

### Return on Investment

Visitor expenditures attributed to the marketing campaign show the incremental expenditure brought to the destination as a direct result of the marketing campaigns. The total expenditure generated for those who reported to have visited

the destination is composed of the sum of the visitors' expenditure and the total expenditure of the extenders. The total expenditure is then moderated to take into account nonresponse bias. Return on investment can then be calculated by dividing this figure by the total cost of the campaign.

$$\text{Return on Investment} = \frac{\text{Total Expenditure Generated}}{\text{Campaign Cost}}$$

Analysis of Table 3 shows that in both absolute and relative terms, there is considerable variability across campaigns. In terms of total expenditures adjusted for nonresponse bias, campaigns 16, 15, and 17 generate the most substantial expenditure of £12.1 million, £3.3 million, and £2.9 million, respectively. The split between expenditure generated by visitors and expenditure generated by extenders is almost 6 to 1 (85% to 15% on average). In terms of expenditure per contact, campaign 17 generated the most revenue per contact at £243.40 for every inquirer, followed by campaign 16 (£186.20) and campaign 15 (£144.60). Across the 18 campaigns, the average revenue per contact is £92.30.

Return on investment averaged 10:1 across the 18 campaigns; however, there is a marked difference between campaigns. Six campaigns return more than 15:1 while six campaigns return less than 2:1. Interestingly, while campaigns 4 and 8 are similar in terms of magnitude of revenue generated, campaign 1 has a good return on investment even though in absolute terms it is about one-fifth the size of the other two campaigns, proving that a healthy return on investment is not necessarily a function of economies of scale.

What is of interest to DMOs is to determine which components of the return on investment calculation have the most



**Table 3.** Return on Investment

Campaign No.	Visitors' Expenditure (in £)	Extenders' Expenditure (in £)	Total Expenditure (in £)	Adjusted for Nonresponse (in £)	Expenditure per Contact (in £)	Return on Investment (in £)
1	414,918	62,543	477,461	381,969	49.8	15.9
2	552,697	131,385	684,083	547,266	125.5	9.6
3	194,422	61,789	256,211	204,969	86.7	6.0
4	2,811,647	126,345	2,937,992	2,350,393	100.2	14.4
5	1,035,653	70,391	1,106,043	884,835	120.3	8.2
6	44,579	6,405	50,984	40,788	40.3	1.4
7	44,013	3,578	47,591	38,073	57.0	1.5
8	2,341,302	256,331	2,597,633	2,078,106	83.2	15.9
9	310,680	84,827	395,507	316,406	73.8	2.2
10	44,568	0	44,568	35,654	28.5	0.7
11	316,666	30,321	346,987	277,590	86.4	1.8
12	2,311	115,437	117,748	94,198	22.1	0.7
13	21,174	7,057	28,230	22,584	56.1	2.0
14	29,828	115	29,943	23,955	42.3	0.5
15	3,741,389	347,517	4,088,907	3,271,125	144.6	18.0
16	14,846,788	298,929	15,145,716	12,116,573	186.2	36.6
17	3,627,211	58,687	3,685,897	2,948,718	243.4	27.7
18	1,631,331	42,921	1,674,252	1,339,401	114.5	16.6

influence. With 18 evaluated campaigns as a sample size, the most appropriate statistical technique to measure which components of the return on investment calculation have the most influence would be to examine the correlation coefficients of the relevant variables. Correlation coefficients provide an indication of how key performance indicators such as return on investment and the net conversion rate are related to other evaluation measurements. As a further extension to this research, additional applications could be appended to the data set to enable regression analysis to be used to estimate which variables have the greatest impact on the dependent variable. The number of applications would need to be at least  $N = 30$  as a rule of thumb for regression analysis to be implemented. Nevertheless, to determine which statistical tests to implement, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test (DeGroot 1991) is used to decide if a sample comes from a population with a normal distribution and hence whether to use parametric or nonparametric tests. Across all variables, despite only 18 observations, we could not reject the null hypothesis that the data followed a normal distribution; hence the parametric Pearson correlation coefficient is used. Table 4 shows that return on investment is positively correlated with the expenditure variables. Interestingly, the cost of the campaign is positively correlated with return on investment. This implies that larger campaigns (in terms of costs) are more successful as measured by return on investment. The cost of the campaign and the number of contacts are closely related, implying that larger campaigns benefit from economies of scale that flow on to higher return on investment figures. The net conversion rate, another measure of campaign success, is strongly correlated with the gross conversion rate (the

**Table 4.** Correlation Coefficients

Correlation	Return on Investment	Net Conversion Rate
Visitors' expenditure	0.839***	0.408
Extenders' expenditure	0.645***	0.276
Total expenditure	0.841***	0.408
Adjusted expenditure	0.841***	0.408
Campaign cost	0.637***	0.314
Contacts	0.841***	0.366
Gross conversion rate	0.260	0.814***
Booked	0.132	0.127
Influence: definitely	0.355	0.942***
Influence: probably	0.557**	0.563**
Influence: possibly	0.456	0.227
Net conversion rate	0.307	–
Return on investment	–	0.307

\*\* $p = .05$ . \*\*\* $p = .01$ .

visitation rate) and with the direct influence of the marketing campaign to convert a possible visit into a certainty.

### Analysis by Campaign Type

The five DMPs have different products to market. Because they know their destination and the different attractions it offers better than the regional tourism agency, the DMPs decide on the most appropriate marketing campaigns to encourage domestic tourism to the destinations. The 18 marketing campaigns evaluated can be segmented into generic or niche marketing campaigns. The niche marketing campaigns tend to be characterized by targeting a special-interest

**Table 5.** Comparison of Generic versus Niche Marketing Campaigns

	Campaign Type		
	All Campaigns	Generic	Niche
Visitors' expenditure, £	1,778,399	3,159,381	397,416*
Extenders' expenditure, £	94,699	158,527	30,871**
Total expenditure, £	1,873,097	3,317,908	428,287*
Adjusted expenditure, £	1,498,478	2,654,327	342,629*
Revenue per inquiry, £	92	120	65**
Campaign cost, £	100,436	142,537	58,335**
Cost per visitor, £	82	29	135
Cost per converted visitor, £	209	74	345
Cost per inquiry, £	19	12	25
Contacts	13,705	22,562	4847*
Gross conversion rate, %	42.9	47.5	38.3
Booked	8.2	11.2	5.2**
Influence: definitely, %	12.2	14	10.5*
Influence: probably, %	10.6	12.4	8.8
Influence: possibly, %	9.8	11.5	8
Net conversion rate, %	18.4	20.2	16.6*
Return on investment	10	14.5	5.4*

\* $p = .10$ . \*\* $p = .05$ .

group such as motorsport enthusiasts or outdoor activity tourists. These campaigns tend to use more specialized marketing tools to attract visitors such as e-viral campaigns or having a promotions stand at a consumer exhibition event, while the generic marketing campaigns are less targeted and involve more mainstream visitor marketing tools such as the distribution of visitor guides.

Of the 18 campaigns, 9 could be categorized as generic campaigns and 9 as niche campaigns. The key evaluation measurements are shown in Table 5. The two-sided *t*-tests are used to test the difference between the two types of campaigns on a range of measurements. The generic marketing campaigns perform significantly better than the niche marketing campaigns on a range of measurements, including total expenditure, revenue per inquiry, and return on investment, despite the cost of the campaign being significantly higher for the generic campaigns. The bivariate relationship between return on investment and the cost of the campaign can be seen in Figure 1. The scatterplot shows that in general, generic marketing campaigns, while costing more to implement, provide a higher return on investment than niche marketing campaigns.

### Research Limitations and Improvements

Conversion studies are part of accountability research in tourism marketing. These types of studies determine whether the advertisement reaches its market and provide an assessment of the quality and quantity of the travel information pack. Nevertheless, as with any methodology, there are limitations

with this methodology as well as this particular piece of research. An alternative way to circumvent some of these limitations would be to conduct proper evaluation research that compares the impact of an intervention by using a control and treatment group (Woodside 1981). Woodside et al. (1997) outlines a method of conducting this quasi-experiment through exit surveys. Through creating an experiment that compares the behavior of visitors who receive or request the marketing stimuli with that of visitors who did not, a proper evaluation can take place for whether the destination marketing material influenced visitors' intention to visit the destination, actual visits, and travel behavior. Significantly more resources may be needed to undertake this approach; however it seems to be of value.

There is an underlying assumption of a direct, causal relationship between an information request and a destination visit. This may not necessarily be the case. Moreover, conversion studies typically assume that the potential visitors' only source of information was the marketing campaign. However, most visitors draw from a variety of sources, including previous visits, word-of-mouth, and travel agents. Alternatively, there are other reasons for requesting the information packages from destinations, such as school projects to moving to the destination for example (Burke and Gitelson 1990). This is something to keep in mind when measuring return on investment of marketing campaigns.

Response rates of under 30% brings into question the issue of nonresponse bias. The issue being that visitors to the destination are more likely to respond to a survey regarding the destination than people who have not visited the destination (Ellerbrock 1981). Low response rates and the issue of

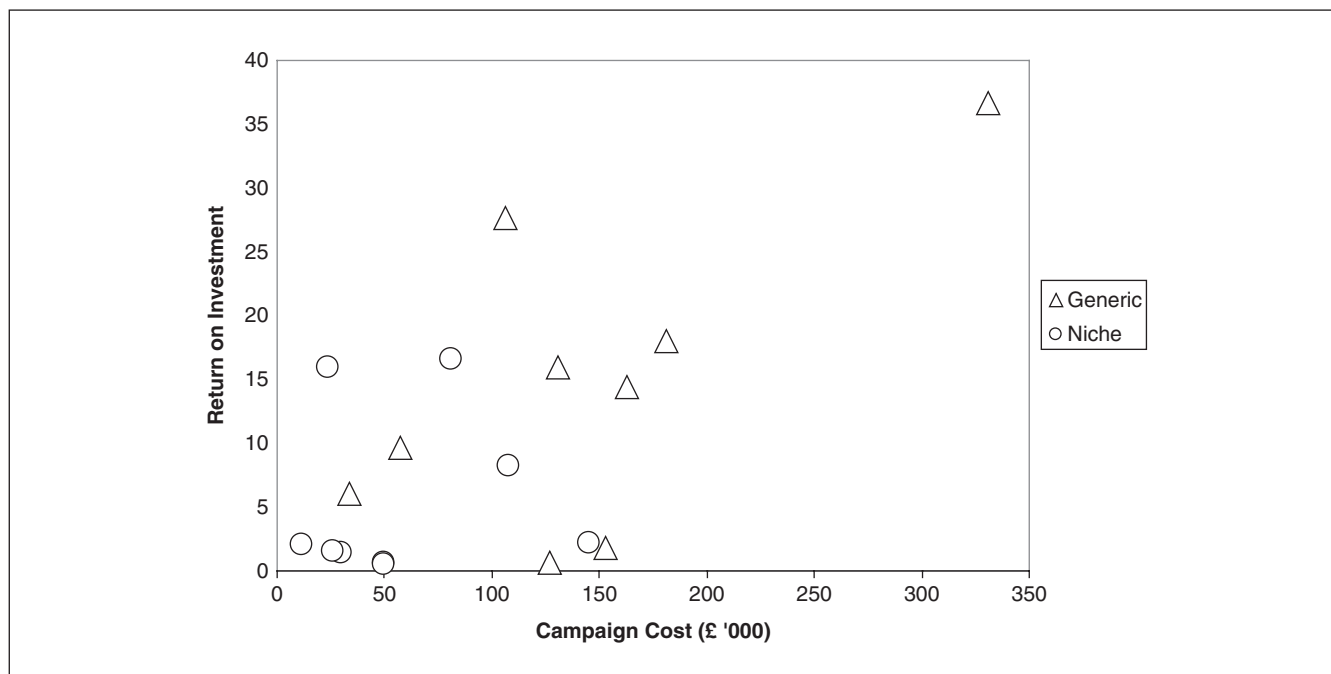


Figure 1. Return on Investment and Campaign Cost for Generic and Niche Campaigns

nonresponse bias is a problem even though the total number of surveys returned is statistically valid (Tierney 2000). To increase the response rate, researchers typically have followed Dillman's Total Design Method (Dillman 1978), which advocates the sending of two follow-up questionnaires to nonrespondents, among other techniques to increase response rates. These campaigns consisted of only a one-shot mail survey and hence present a limitation of this research. Woodside and Ronkainen (1984) conclude that conversion rates and travel behavior patterns did significantly differ between first-, second-, and third-wave respondents. Resources could have been devoted to extensively following up nonrespondents using substantial incentives or alternative data collection methods (Crompton and Tian-Cole 2001). Nevertheless, all campaigns use the same methodology, so again the comparison is like-with-like.

This research identified the destination in the cover letter and questionnaire. This is the typical practice in tourism conversion studies. Nevertheless, several studies have noted that if the sponsor of the research is identified the conversion rates are higher and response rates are lower than when the sponsor is not identified (Woodside 1981; Woodside and Dubelaar 2003). Future research may want to explore this area more. Furthermore, conversion studies can be augmented with the use of other methodologies to evaluate the marketing activities. Advertising tracking models measures changes in the levels of a destination's awareness and its image in target markets (McWilliams and Crompton 1997). The effectiveness of the advertising is not limited by the visiting of a destination or not but includes a range of psychological and cognitive dimensions that can affect awareness and intention

to visit well into the future. The use of advertising tracking models (Siegel and Ziff-Levine 1990) as well as the use of econometric techniques (Messmer and Johnson 1993; Butterfield et al. 1998) to determine the likelihood that a person will visit a destination after receiving marketing material in a wide range of forms, extending from printed material to Web-based information, can further aid tourism marketers to assessing the impact of their marketing campaigns.

## Conclusions and Implications

Despite the common limitations in evaluation methodologies identified above, there are clearly many merits in undertaking cross-evaluation on the impact of destination marketing campaigns that use the same methods. This article has shown that by comparing results of campaigns the RDAs and DMOs can more effectively assess the contribution of certain types (generic vs. niche) or scale of campaign activity to return on investment. The study indicates the value that can be gained from such comparative analysis in terms of increased insights into the value and direction of advertising spending and thus can contribute to more effective strategic decision making on DMPs' marketing activity.

In addition, the results have shown that observing only the gross conversion rate can provide a misleading picture as to the success of a marketing campaign. The net conversion rate—a more appropriate measure of the influence of a marketing campaign to drive visitors to a destination—can vary markedly from the gross conversion rate because of the impact of the proportion of visitors who have already booked or committed at the time of requesting information

from the DMO or DMP and the degree to which the marketing influenced the visitors' decision to turn a possible visit into a certainty. Regardless of the overall magnitude of the marketing campaign in terms of costs and campaign reach, incisive and intelligent marketing can entice visitors to the destination. The comparative analysis has shown that the key factors determining a good return on DMOs' marketing investment are fivefold, of which destination marketers can influence most factors:

1. the proportion of visitors who have booked before receiving the marketing material;
2. the proportion of respondents who visited the destination;
3. influence of the marketing material;
4. visitor expenditures:
  - a. per person per night expenditure,
  - b. length of stay in the destination,
  - c. party size; and
5. reach of the marketing campaign.

While it may be difficult for DMOs and DMPs to directly affect the first two factors, there are many things these organizations can do to influence higher visitor expenditures. This variable is a combination of three issues: per person per night expenditures (4a) can be increased through the marketing of suggested itineraries or promotion of attractions; for example increased length of stays (4b) might be achieved through marketing with incentives of extra nights' accommodation promotions or working with destination partners to bundle attractions and increased party size (4c), although difficult for marketers to influence, might be achieved by encouraging travel groups to take extended family, such as grandparents, along for the trip. Second, it is the function of marketing to influence factors (3) and (5). The stronger the influence of the marketing on consumers, the larger the return on investment, as DMOs motivate potential visitors to take a trip to the destination. This can be achieved with a strong call to action from the marketing collateral. Lastly, the reach of the marketing campaign is important to achieve high visitor expenditure figures. It is not enough that the marketing campaign is influential in driving a decision to visit the destination or that visitors who visit the destination as a direct result of the marketing campaign have a high visitor expenditure. The marketing need to reach a significant number of potential visitors still needs to be well targeted so that the offer to visit the destination is relevant and attractive.

The correlation analysis identified that the two key factors correlated to return on investment are visitor expenditures and the number of contacts, that is, the reach of the marketing campaign. Interestingly, the campaign costs are positively related to return on investment, implying that the more funds spent on the marketing, the higher the return on investment. This is somewhat counterintuitive but can be explained by the strong relationship between the cost of the campaign and

the number of potential visitors exposed to the campaign. Hence economies of scale can be taken advantage of. Furthermore, the more generic marketing campaigns tend to be more successful than niche marketing campaigns. The return on investment is almost 3 times as high for the generic campaigns. The research findings imply that DMOs would be best advised to market their destinations quite inclusively, appealing to as many potential visitors as possible. The more segmented marketing campaigns may struggle to convert potential visitors and could be less cost-efficient.

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