

Serving those less able: are we up to it? Accommodating aging and disabled travellers

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This paper explores the impact of increasing tourism numbers on the accommodation industry and how an aging population coupled with less-abled travellers will need more consideration when the facilities being offered. Suggestion is made that education providers have a responsibility to include information regarding the needs of this expanding sector of the market.

Abstract

Tourism is an \$18.6 billion industry, currently accounting for 19.2% of New Zealand's total revenue (Ministry of Tourism, 2007), and New Zealand hosted around 2.15 million visitors in the year preceding July 2008. However, statistics show that 10% of the world's population has a disability. In New Zealand 17% of the residents are registered as having a disability (Statistics N.Z.) and almost half of New Zealand's visitors are aged 45 and over. This demographic has the greatest discretionary income, and enjoys spending it on travelling. Also Statistics New Zealand (2007) has identified a significant increase in numbers of older residents, many of whom will not be as agile as younger travellers.

In 2011, the Rugby World cup will be held in Auckland, New Zealand. During a recent interview The Prime Minister, John key stated that he is 'confident this will be a great way to showcase New Zealand to billions of worldwide viewers and the 60,000 odd tourists that will come to New Zealand from overseas' (para.14). To cater for the anticipated tourism influx more accommodation is planned, with some already under construction. Examples of proposed developments include the Pullman Hotel, Auckland (290 rooms), the Hilton Hotel, Dunedin (100 rooms) and Queenstown (106 rooms), and the Westin Hotel, Queenstown (177 rooms). With such a high level of development, these properties will results in significant labour and skills implications. In fact, New Zealand's hospitality and tourism industry will need to employ 100,000 more people to meet industry demands by 2010 (New Zealand Hotel Council, 2007).

This anticipated growth has led to an increase in the number of education providers offering papers in hospitality, travel and tourism. However, there is no evidence that education providers are including training for dealing with aged or impaired travellers, even though statistics show that this is the main growth area.

A study undertaken by Rhodda (2009) revealed that 23 universities and polytechnics that delivered tourism subjects were contacted to assess whether or not they included disability issues in their curriculum. Only 15 educators responded to the survey and of those, nearly half said that this area was not considered. The few respondents that replied noted that some access issues were covered, but were not included in any form of assessment. This suggests that educators are guilty of ignoring the emerging growth sector of aged and disabled travellers. Disabled people can be helped only if workers have been taught how to do so. If New Zealand is serious about offering an inclusive environment for visitors, education providers should be encouraged to develop curricula that address issues for disabled travellers.

Increasingly, travellers are likely to have some form of disability, yet unless training and education accommodates this, travellers are likely to have less than satisfactory experiences. An aim of this study was therefore to identify ways of preparing students to meet the needs of this developing market.

This action research examined the attitudes of students enrolled on a Diploma of Hospitality Management at AUT University, to see if any change in attitudes occurred that could be attributed to targeted learning about disabilities issues. Students were surveyed and interviewed before and after an assignment on appraising facilities in commercial accommodation for disabled travellers.

Attitudes are formed from learned responses to the environment and include assumptions derived from knowledge and belief systems, such as the idea that an emotional display is unmanly or a person with a physical disability using a wheelchair is also deaf. By introducing new information it is therefore possible to change attitudes, because information is the means by which people change attitudes and perceptions (Daruwalla and Darcy, 2005).

Results of the focus groups and surveys suggested that attitudinal changes could be made using targeted education. Furthermore, changes were persistent, in that they were still evident a year later. The respondents' exposure to disability issues had allowed them to realise the importance of training for staff, and the response change between surveys indicated not only a personal attitudinal change was effected with many students, but also, a real appreciation of the importance of the disabled market. This realisation of the impact and importance of disability issues reinforces the need for education providers to target their education to the needs of travellers of all abilities. Students who have been exposed to an overview of disability issues are likely to enter the workforce with an improved understanding of their ethical responsibilities towards the range of people with whom they will interact (Ross, 2004). Students in hospitality and tourism education will encounter people with varying abilities when they enter the work force. Many of these students will eventually become future manager and employers themselves. As an education provider

there is an ethic responsibility to ensure students have the best knowledge possible to deliver a professional approach to tourism in New Zealand.

Disabled people can be helped if workers are familiar with their needs and know how to provide appropriate support where needed. If New Zealand is serious about providing an inclusive environment, education providers will need to reflect this in their curricula.

Results of this study demonstrate that the disability and aged market is a growth sector with the time and resources and to travel. Hospitality providers who understand and respond to the needs of this market will be well equipped to welcome these travellers in the future. The economic benefits of providing for this market should be a major consideration for all tourism and hospitality providers.

Keywords: Hospitality, disabilities, students, attitudinal change, age.

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