



The Psychology of Travel – The “New Normal”

January 2003

The Strategic Travel Action Resource – or STAR – is a timely, topical, brief report replacing what was currently referred to as an Industry Report. The STAR adds to it an element of strategic thinking and planning for the future. In every STAR, NTA members will be able to understand exactly why this research is relevant to them and go away with a better understanding of how they can relate the information to their business and future planning.

The Psychology of Travel series is the first of the STARs to be produced. The series of reports will look at various aspects of why people travel and the psychological motivators that guide them.

The term **New Normal** has been used a great deal since September 11, 2001. The events of that day, in the eyes of many, have permanently changed the way people, particularly those in the United States, view the world and their place in it. While people have returned to the everyday – going back to work, back to school, spending time with friends and family, eating out, going to movies and traveling – there is still something that is changed. The effects of Sept. 11 shook the foundation of our lives and this New Normal has crept up subtly ever since. Think about how many times we each start sentences with “since Sept. 11....”¹

Everyone wishes to move on and, particularly in the travel industry, wants to work toward a full business recovery. However, it cannot be denied that this New Normal does exist and will be affecting the way consumers make decisions for years to come. Today’s consumer has redefined what they perceive as “normal” and accepted that things will probably never be as they were before. Sadly, while people who live in many other parts of the world are accustomed to threats of terrorist activity and the idea of buying a gas mask is not so far-fetched, this is a new emotion for people in the United States and Canada.

A 2002 anthropological study of U.S. consumers identified a set of 15 personal attributes that describe people living in the New Normal. They are: cynical, holistic, complacent, fatigued, expectant, adaptive, realistic, spontaneous, introspective, reflective, appreciative, skeptical, aware, prideful and self-reliant.² All of these attitudes affect your

¹ “The New Normal: A Portrait of Today’s Consumer,” Context-Based Research Group, 2002.

² Ibid.

business and the way you market and sell to today's new consumer. Keep these in mind as you continue through this STAR.

Giving the Traveler Control

Just as many things about the world as we know it changed after September 11, 2001, consumer behavior also changed, perhaps forever. This is particularly relevant in the travel industry. As discussed in this series of STARS, one of the key motivations for travel is relaxation. The events of September 11 and the fear that followed, particularly when it comes to flying and traveling too far from one's home or comfort zone, had a devastating affect on consumer behavior in the aftermath of that event. What was once primarily motivated by the need for stress relief was now a great source of stress.

However, as consumers have accepted the New Normal, they have begun to travel again. As it was even before the events of September 2001, consumers have always viewed travel as a process. A Carton Donofrio Partners study identified that process as the following: a traveler **plans** the trip, they travel via some **mode** of transportation (airplane, motorcoach, car, train, ship, etc.), they arrive at their **destination** for some stated amount of time and then pass back through the **mode** in their return home. If one part of this travel process falls apart or causes stress, the entire experience can be tarnished. If one looks at the travel process as defined here, the mode plays a huge role. Whatever happens in that segment of the travel process happens twice! This can be a cause of great distress to travelers today, as it is the mode of travel that often causes the most hassles.

There are also three variables identified in the Carton Donofrio study that outline the needs that travelers seek to fulfill. They are **control**, **service** and **joy**. Ideally, the level of service would be the simplest of needs for travel professionals to fulfill as consumers naturally expect a certain level of service throughout their travel process. The level of joy would reach its peak while in the traveler's destination. The exact level of that peak can vary according to the service they've received. ***Where the travelers' needs aren't being met in today's New Normal is in the area of control.***

The study identified the mode as the most consistent area where this control breaks down. While travelers want increased security, it is that security that is causing their distress within the modes of travel. And, in the study, travelers expressed they give up the most control with air travel. They reported feeling helpless, vulnerable, isolated and alone – none of which are emotions that make a person feel in control.³

Within this study are great opportunities for NTA members. Tour operators, tour suppliers and DMOs can help give people back the control they feel is lacking. By offering first quality service and providing travelers with a range of options, a feeling of control can be regained.⁴ As stated earlier, perhaps the biggest advantage for tour operators can be in the mode portion of the process.

Regardless of the vehicle used to transport travelers, the tour operator can offer options that perhaps the traveler had not considered. Additionally, while no one can override the security measures at today's airports, the tour operator can certainly offer the traveler the added control of their expertise and make every step of the process that can be

³ "Travel Today," Carton Donofrio Partners Inc. and Context-Based Research Group, 2002.

⁴ Ibid.

planned for and controlled as easy and stress-free as possible. What the Carton Donofrio study illustrated was that when consumers saw their needs not being met in the mode, they were disappointed with the overall travel process. As one considers the fact that the mode affects the travelers mood en route to their destination and again as they travel home, it is easy to understand why a bad experience in that part of the process could override the outstanding service and joy they experienced while at their destination.

NTA members have a huge opportunity to be ahead of the curve with this kind of understanding and insight into the New Normal that exists today. DMOs can look at ways to start the destination experience earlier in the process. For example, is there something that, as a DMO, you can deliver the tour operator that can add value to the traveler's experience before they depart or during the mode portion of the process? Tour suppliers and operators can personalize their services whenever possible to help create a sense of one-on-one connections with the travelers. Also, offering the traveler the opportunity to exercise various personal options at any point in the travel process will increase their desire for service and, in the end, increase the level of joy and overall control.

Living in Uncertainty

Part of the New Normal is an **awareness** that, from this point on, uncertainty can prevail. As this STAR is being developed, possibilities of war and more terrorist threats loom large over the world. People are living with constant stress and fear as they see the news reports on securing your home and family, changing levels of alertness from the Homeland Security office and details on preparation for things that were previously unthinkable. While the imminent threats may pass, life will continue with various levels of alertness reported from our government officials and a constant wondering of what will happen next.

In addition to the psychological stress that is inherent in these scenarios, reports have emerged on the biological affects that stress can cause. A February 24 *Newsweek* article stated, "The psychological state of fear affects us biologically. People who are anxious drink and eat more. They have more accidents. They're more likely to get colds or suffer heart attacks." In short, this constant state of fear eats away at people. The article goes on to discuss the process known as fear conditioning. Prolonged stimulus equated to a stressful or fearful situation, such as a loud noise, can cause that stimulus to trigger paralyzing fear responses. For instance, if a subject heard a loud ring just before receiving a shock, eventually just the loud noise would cause the fearful reaction of a shock, without the actual shock occurring.⁵

So how does this relate to travel? With the constant threats and reminders of how alert we, as a nation, must be there is the added psychological and physiological stress. Simply put, the continued warnings and reports of uncertainty with security or the economy can condition us to illicit our fear response. There may be no actual threat, but those stimuli that we associate with the fear of today can cause the symptoms of those fears to materialize. And, with these added stresses to mind and body, there isn't a better time to take advantage of the relaxation and escape that travel can provide.

⁵ "Our Bodies, Our Fears," *Newsweek*, February 24, 2003.

However, travel professionals must do everything in their power to alleviate possible causes of stress within the process. The industry should also recognize the new mindsets or attributes that customers in this New Normal have adopted – such as ***holistic, fatigued, spontaneous, or introspective*** – and strive to provide the components to meet those mindsets. A new respect for family makes family-friendly travel a necessity. The “live for today” spontaneity creates the need for flexible booking options and for tour suppliers and operators to work together to create more customized product available at shorter notice. A new awareness of spirituality post Sept. 11 has continued and could be reflected in the experiences available in a trip. There are a lot of opportunities that NTA members can pull from this information to make their product more appealing to a forever-changed consumer.

Marketing in the New Normal

A recent Yankelovich Monitor LIVE session titled “A Look Ahead to 2003” discussed this transition that consumers will be facing in 2003 as these fears and anxieties continue. As we’ve discussed, attitudes are changing. Consumers are discussing their new values of time, family and intangible possessions. This is placing us in what J. Walker Smith described as a post-accumulation marketplace.

As Smith also noted, today’s consumers are craving high-touch in a high-tech world and will really appreciate small remembrances and technology that helps them stay in touch. These are outstanding ideas that can be utilized by NTA members in creating loyalty programs or identifying ways to provide consumers with more control and joy in the travel process. Or perhaps, a friendly e-mail to customers from someone they know that is brief, conversational and interactive. As for small remembrances to create loyalty, pictures from their last trip, picture frames or other items that are a reminder of the fun and togetherness of the trip are a great way to make customers feel like they are part of your company’s family, not just another customer.

One final topic that Smith discussed with regard to today’s consumer is the growing mistrust of institutions. While Smith acknowledged that it is American to have some level of mistrust, 2002 saw reasons for people to mistrust government, church and business. At a time when the need for trust in these institutions was at its highest level (post Sept. 11), the reality was that trust was at its lowest. This increase in mistrust serves to make consumers ever more resistant to marketing messages.

As consumers become more and more cynical, skeptical and aware (once again we recall the personal attributes of the New Normal), companies should remember several points. First, the grand statement or promise that has little chance of being met is the kiss of death for a marketing program. Make small, meaningful promises that will be upheld and a customer’s trust will be gained – one promise at a time. Also, specific promises or claims build trust, not obscure messages that appear to be spun toward the positive. Remind customers why they have used your company or service in the past and why they can continue to trust the brand. Relationship selling is key!⁶

⁶ Yankelovich Montior LIVE, “A Look Ahead to 2003,” December 18, 2002.

What does this mean for me?

Consumer behavior has been so dramatically changed from the events of 2001 and 2002 that they are forever changed – creating this New Normal. As our world becomes more and more reliant upon technology, a company that can offer the benefits of this technology while keeping their human element will be ahead of the curve. Gaining trust is more important than ever and keeping the new stresses of travel to a minimum to help consumers obtain their goal of relaxation can all positively affect a consumer's behavior and loyalty toward your company.

If there isn't joy in travel, the entire process and everything that travel means to the consumer is lost. Anything that travel professionals can do to help the traveling public see the bigger value of travel will prove to be beneficial to the industry. Tour operators are in a prime position to use their role in the travel process by taking control, eliminating the worry and anxiety and, in turn, giving a sense of control back to the traveler. Additionally, the tour operator role extends beyond control to all three facets of the travel experience from planning to mode to destination. There is a huge opportunity to help meet needs that, currently, travelers feel are not being met!

To make your company more appealing to travelers in the New Normal, Carton Donofrio suggests you ask yourself these three questions:

- *How can my company spread its influence across the entire travel process, from planning to mode to destination to home?*
- *How does my company currently satisfy the three basic traveler needs of control, service and joy?*
- *How can my company improve on that for tomorrow?*

There also some strategic thought-starters provided in the Carton Donofrio study that can help your company in preparing for the future and branding your travel product. They are:

- *How does my company continually build customer needs into its ongoing experience/product design process?*
- *Re-examine your brand's core values. How do they fit with today's consumer's view of the travel process? How do they work to satisfy the three basic traveler needs? What does this say about your brand?*
- *Where does your influence in the travel process begin and end? Can that change to better brand your product? Example – could a hotel give customers airport wait time updates at checkout? Could a tour operator provide safe-travel counseling and individual security tips to customers as they are choosing a package?*
- *How can you positively affect word-of-mouth?*

- *How can you expand your current partnerships in order to expand your influence across the travel process? Are there new partnerships to explore?*
- *How do you also provide control, service and joy to your employees so it is passed along to your customers? Where and how do your employees learn about delivering control, service and joy?*
- *What kind of services do you provide that give travelers control? Joy? Service? Remember, think across the entire process – not just your part. Example – Control? How can a tour operator assist with baggage claim to add control and eliminate stress? Joy? – Could a tour operator give their customers disposable cameras to help capture memories and follow-up with a coupon for free developing of the film shortly after they arrive home?⁷*

We all must adjust to the New Normal, not just in our businesses but also in our own personal lives. The “carpe diem” attitudes, the search for added value and the emphasis on family are all seen in this new consumer and hold implications for all businesses – particularly travel. If recognized and planned for, NTA members can thrive in the New Normal.

⁷ “Travel Today,” Carton Donofrio Partners Inc. and Context-Based Research Group, 2002.