

Gateway Yorkshire

- an evaluation of a tourist information service from a user perspective

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Introduction

This article will examine the effectiveness of an innovative new tourist information service - Gateway Yorkshire based in Leeds - for tourists and local residents. It will use the results of data collected from a user survey and a range of interviews(1). The paper will discuss the background to the tourist industry and the need for tourist information. Then it will examine the need for effectiveness measures, set the effectiveness criteria for the study and analyse the results from the user survey.

Background to the tourist industry and tourist information

Higher disposable incomes and an increase in leisure time increases the demand for leisure services. The supply of tourism services provides many new employment opportunities. Consequently tourism has become one of the UK's biggest industries, employing 1.6 million people, earning £7.1 billion in foreign exchange, and becoming the fifth largest overseas market for foreign visitors in 1991 (NEDC, 1992). However, an important part of the tourism industry is the growth of business tourism and 'urban tourism' (Page, 1995), thereby making Leeds an attractive tourist destination.

Tourism is a very information-intensive activity. The intangible tourism service cannot be physically displayed or inspected at the point of sale, so consumers rely on tourist information provided by public authorities - hence the role for Tourist Information Centres (TICs).

The hierarchy of tourism promotion in the UK is fragmented and complex, involving many different Government departments and the private sector, resulting in a diverse and complicated funding of TICs. Over the years funding from the English Tourist Board via the British Tourist Authority and the Department of National Heritage has been reduced, resulting in TICs relying more heavily on private sector partnerships (YHTB Annual Report, 1994).

Gateway Yorkshire Initiative

The Gateway Yorkshire initiative was started in May 1995, opening at a new location - Leeds railway station complex. The Gateway Yorkshire initiative is a new approach to the provision of tourist information services based on a partnership between the key tourism industry players in Leeds - Leeds City Council, West Yorkshire Passenger Transport Authority (Metro), Railtrack, Yorkshire and Humberside Tourist Board (YHTB), Leeds Hotels Association and the various Leeds based tourist attractions. It offers the UK's first combined regional travel and tourist information centre.

The services provided by Gateway Yorkshire are more extensive than a traditional TIC. There are three main service areas :-

- i) Tourist Information - providing tourist information not only on local attractions, but also regional and national information. The service includes a touch screen facility, giving users information at a touch of a button;

ii) Travel Centre - enabling customers to purchase coach and bus tickets;

iii) Visitor and Convention Bureau - a new division designed to organise conferences in Leeds and attract business tourism.

It is a form of 'one-stop-shop' for visitors to Leeds and the region as a whole. To provide these services Gateway Yorkshire employ three full and three part-time members of staff (two part-timers only work at weekends and Bank Holidays - a total of four staff can be on duty behind the counter at one time); the conference bureau has two full-time staff.

Methodology for the case study

From the extensive literature available on tourism (such as Burkart & Medlick, 1981; Holloway, 1989; Cooper et al, 1993), there is very little on TICs, with no published research on the effectiveness of TICs, and no study of user perceptions. The Gateway Yorkshire study was conducted to fill the gap in the literature between the basic characteristics of how a centre operates, and how the different users of the TIC perceive these operations.

To conduct the study two key sources of information were utilised. Firstly a number of interviews were conducted with representatives from Gateway Yorkshire and Leeds City Council, and also other external organisations which have dealings with Gateway Yorkshire - Leeds Hotels Association, Harewood House (a major tourist attraction), and Shearings (a major coach operator).

Secondly, a 'user survey' was carried out in September 1995 to establish the customer's opinion about Gateway Yorkshire - a study not previously attempted. Appropriate effectiveness measures were then applied to examine how effective Gateway Yorkshire was as an information provider. Furthermore, whilst carrying out the survey observation was made of the centre including number of people at the counter, layout of the centre and which leaflets proved most popular.

Effectiveness

Since 1979 there has been an increasing emphasis on improving performance in the public sector, which has led to the development of systems for measuring performance (Jackson, 1993). Moreover, with the establishment of Citizens' Charters the effectiveness of public services from the perception of users/customers/clients have been given greater priority. Hence the study of Gateway Yorkshire focused on the perceptions of members of the public and private sector companies.

- Criteria used for the study

Effectiveness can be measured in a number of ways (LGIU, 1994). However, due to a lack of statistical data from both Gateway Yorkshire and YHTB, the following effectiveness measures were applied to Gateway Yorkshire :-

1. **Number of visitors**
2. **Types of visitors** - local, regional or international visitors
3. **Services available** - to see if there are sufficient in an information unit
4. **Staff** - to see if numbers are sufficient to ensure that customers are dealt with efficiently and effectively

5. **Information technology** - the use of IT can speed up the processing of information, thereby making the service more effective
6. **Marketing** - in terms of marketing itself, the hotels and the attractions

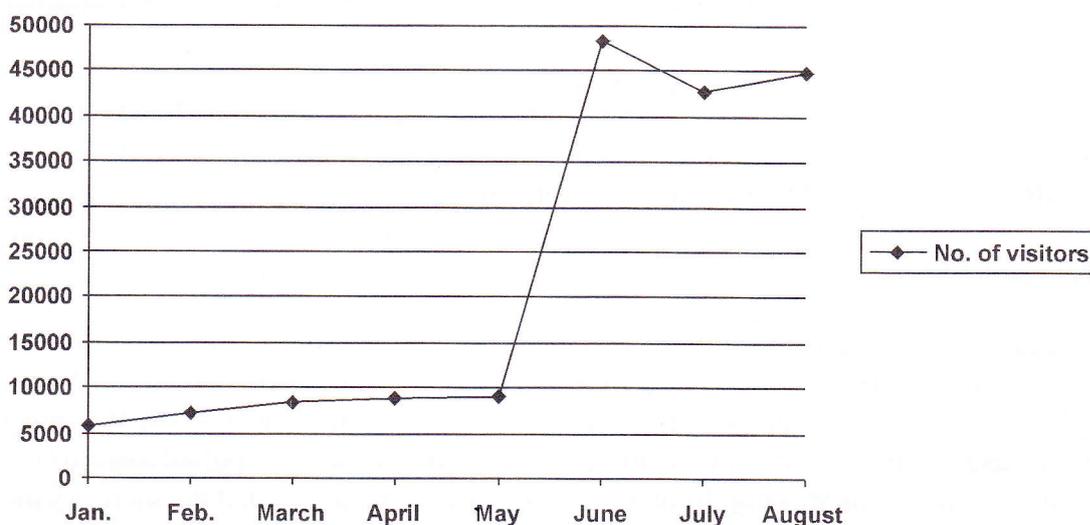
(Other measures would have been useful had they been available, such as aims and objectives of Gateway Yorkshire, target levels for number of visitors, cost effectiveness, comparison with other TICs).

- Evaluating the effectiveness

1. Number of visitors

Initial figures suggested that in comparison with the old local authority style TIC, there was a sizeable increase in visitors using Gateway Yorkshire tourist information services after it opened in May 1995.

Figure 1 The number of visitors to the TIC and Gateway Yorkshire (1995)



Source : Figures from Gateway Yorkshire

The clear increase in the number of visitors (monitored mechanically when visitors pass through the door) during June coincides with the opening of Gateway Yorkshire at its prestigious site within the Leeds Railway station complex. Its location easily allowed people using train services to enter the Gateway Yorkshire centre. Unfortunately, many people actually used the centre as a walkway from the station to the main street, and as a result the figures are inflated and do not accurately represent how many people actually used the Gateway Yorkshire services during the summer of 1995.

2. Types of visitors

Gateway Yorkshire did not keep a record of the different types of visitor eg age groups, number of local, regional, national and international visitors. Therefore, the figures for this section were obtained through the user survey. Although only a small sample of visitors were interviewed, it does give an indication of types of visitors.

Of those people surveyed, 56% were female and 44% male, and table 1 shows the approximate age range of those surveyed. (As well as making a note of gender, an estimate was also made to their ages.)

Table 1 Estimate of age of users surveyed

Age Range	%
20 - 29	38
30 - 39	18
40 - 49	18
50 - 59	12
60 - 69	12
70 - 79	2

The table shows an even age distribution. However, the higher percentage of people in the 20-29 group may have resulted from the number of students getting information about the area before the start of the new term.

Where respondents lived was also noted. The centre clearly attracted mainly local (38% from the Leeds area) and regional (36%) people. The figure for international visitors was 4%, and reflected the local authorities' estimate that 2-5% of visitors are foreign.

3. Services available

The type of information required by those surveyed was also noted. The survey showed that most of the information required was for the Leeds area (43%), compared with 32% for information on the rest of the Yorkshire region. However, from the observation, it was noted that most of the information was for bus timetables, indicating that the centre was being pulled towards becoming merely a travel centre. This was highlighted further by the staff saying that the majority of queries they dealt with were about bus timetables. Of the users surveyed 78% said they had found the information they wanted, which indicated that the centre was very effective in providing information, but the information requested concentrated just on transport, which undermined the effectiveness of the centre as a TIC.

4. Staff

Observation of the centre found the number of counter staff was not sufficient to answer the phone and also deal with customer enquiries. Although a maximum of four staff could work behind the counter, usually there were only two, thus reducing the effectiveness of the centre. During an interview with the assistant manager at Gateway Yorkshire the problem was attributed to financial constraints.

5. Information technology

At the time of the 'user survey', the touch screen set up for customer use was not effective, as 94% of respondents did not know it was there. Those who had used it did not seem particularly impressed with the information provided - very basic information about Leeds resembling more of an electronic bus timetable. Therefore, the effectiveness of this service was poor. In addition, the IT system was not at that time linked up to local hotels.

6. Marketing

In terms of marketing itself the effectiveness of Gateway Yorkshire was somewhat limited. The representative of Shearings had not heard about the Gateway Yorkshire centre, and the majority of people interviewed found the centre while they were passing and had not heard about it before.

In terms of marketing the services of others, Gateway Yorkshire was more successful. The Hotels Association and the local tourist attractions were generally satisfied with the performance of Gateway Yorkshire. However, a further survey on smaller guest houses/ hotels and attractions would be needed to identify their perceptions.

Conclusion and future research

The user survey provided positive results regarding the effectiveness criteria, but also highlighted some negative aspects, such as the need for:

- More staff behind the counter
- Better use to be made of the touch screen facility
- Better marketing of the centre's services
- More focus on tourist information, and less emphasis on transport information
- More information on smaller hotels and guest houses, rather than solely large hotels

This is a provisional conclusion, as Gateway Yorkshire had only been operating for four months before the user survey was carried out. However, from the effectiveness criteria it can be concluded that in terms of numbers and types of visitors and services provided, Gateway Yorkshire was effective. Unfortunately, with regard to staff, information technology and marketing, the centre was not as effective as it might have been.

Therefore, this study may provide the basis for future research in the following areas:

- a further study of this kind, to see if Gateway Yorkshire has improved once it has been established for a while (eg in 4 to 5 years time);
- a survey of guest houses could be carried out, to establish their proprietor's views of the role of the centre as opposed to the views of the large hotels' proprietors;
- further investigation of IT systems, and an investigation into whether customers use the touch screen services provided, to establish if these systems are cost effective.

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