

# **An Investigation of the Attitudes of Travel and Tourism Intermediaries to Mature Travellers**

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***Abstract:** This study considers the attitudes to and experiences of travel agents and tourism intermediaries when servicing the needs of mature travellers. It reviews the literature on mature travellers within the broader area of 'accessible tourism'. The survey of members of a professional association within the travel industry in Auckland, New Zealand highlighted a number of key challenges and opportunities for those working in this increasingly valuable sector of the tourism industry. While this study was a pilot study of the supply side of the tourism industry in Auckland, the research concludes with examples of best practice and some recommendations drawn from the many years' experience of the survey respondents which would form a useful starting point for a more detailed study considering the experiences of mature travellers.*

**Keywords:** Mature travellers, travel agent, tour operator, intermediaries, customer service, New Zealand.

## **Introduction**

This study developed from an initial project to investigate facilities and services for the disabled in hotels (Schitko and Poulston, 2009; Schitko and Simpson, 2011). In the course of that study it was realised that there are many users of hospitality and tourism services who do not have a registered disability (and therefore do not regard themselves as 'disabled' whatever that may encompass), but who do appreciate a certain amount of assistance or support when booking travel or while on their journey. However it should be noted that this study can itself only be another piece in the jigsaw, and this paper finished with as many opportunities for further research into the mature travel market as it does with findings and recommendations. This issue of mature travellers is a very contemporary issue faced by many tourism operators'. For the purpose of this study it is assumed that travellers over the age of 65 are 'mature travellers'. This has long been an accepted benchmark (Visvabharathy and Rink, 1985) and this is the retirement age for pensioners in New Zealand. Visvabharathy and Rink (1985) reported a feeling among marketers that 'the elderly market was not responsive or large enough to justify special attention' (p. 81). However Ananth, DeMicco, Moreo and Howey (1992) forecasted that

by 2030 a third of the US population would be over 55 years of age and they would control nearly half the USA's discretionary income. Vieregge, Phetkaew, Beldona, Lumsden and DeMicco (2007) suggest that 'the mature population is growing dramatically throughout the world and is considered to be the fastest growing segment through the developed world'(p. 167). Other authors have suggested that this market segment is flexible in terms of timing (not tied to school or public holidays), have considerable disposable income because of relatively few financial commitments, and are increasingly fit and healthy for a longer lifespan than previous generations (Wei, Ruys and Muller, 1999; Callan and Bowman, 2000; Fleischer and Pizam, 2002). Discussing the 'Baby Boomers' who were born 1945-1965, Hudson (2010, p. 444) argued that:

'Traveling boomers are looking for a memorable experience rather than a holiday, seeking authenticity, spiritual and mental enlightenment, nostalgia, convenience and spontaneity, all packaged in a safe, customised, healthy, green wrapping and delivered with great customer service.'

If the travel industry can better understand the needs of this group and therefore communicate more effectively with them, then it has an opportunity to build a loyal customer base of affluent consumers who often prefer to travel in off-peak periods. McGuire, Uysal and McDonald (1988) identified this market but said more research was required to understand what their requirements would be and how those might differ from younger travellers. Romsa and Blenman (1989) suggested that mature travellers may be more likely to wish to travel in groups rather than as independent tourists. Grougiou and Pettigrew (2011, p. 477) note 'Age does not always have a linear impact upon individuals' activities and consumption decisions, and changes occur at different times for different people as results of individual choices (e.g. pursuing a career over a family) and situational circumstances (e.g. widowhood)'.

Having established the importance of this area as a subject for research, this paper will now consider the substantial literature which already exists on this topic. There is literature on the definitions and terms used, on the technical requirements of disabled and mature travellers (Petzäll, 1995; Darcy, 2010), on the cultural aspects of what constitutes disability (Woodside and Etzel, 1980; Buhalis and Darcy, 2011), and on mature travellers and their needs (Langlois, Theodore and Ineson, 1999; Huang and Tsai, 2003; Kim, Cheng and O'Leary, 2007). This study explores the attitude of travel operators towards mature travellers and identifies how tourism and travel operators build relationships with this market sector in order to address their needs.

### **Limitations of this Research**

This study focuses on the supply side of tourism intermediaries and how they respond to the needs of the mature traveller. The work does

not contain material regarding the (demand side) thoughts of mature consumers, although this line of research is suggested as area of future study. As the focus of this study is on tour operator attitudes, hotel facilities and accessibility issues are also not specifically addressed within this paper (but see Schitko and Poulston (2009) or Schitko and Simpson (2011) for further discussion on these important issues). However some of the respondents operate accommodation and transport businesses, and their comments are included where appropriate.

## **Theoretical Review**

### **Defining disability and mature tourism.**

Buhalis and Darcy (2011) introduce their text on ‘accessible tourism’ with a foreword from Dr Taleb Rifai, Secretary General of the United Nations World Tourism Organization in which he refers to ‘an ageing population and increasing rates of disability’ (Buhalis and Darcy, 2011, p. xx) demonstrating that the two topics are closely related. These authors warn that the topic itself is very difficult to define as it is (like much of tourism) extremely multidisciplinary, and researchers must also deal with the issues that disability is a cultural and social construct, and that tourists displaying some form of impairment are an extremely diverse and heterogeneous group. Although the United Nations produced the *Convention of Rights of People with Disabilities* in 2006 (<http://www.un.org/disabilities/>) each signatory to the convention must introduce its own national legislation in terms of access rights and building regulations. This makes it very challenging for outbound tourism operators as their clients may be used to certain ‘rights’ in their home country which are not a legal requirement in others and therefore puts the responsibility on the operator to ensure that their clients will consistently have a positive tourism experience.

### **Medical versus Social models of disability**

Disability is regarded by many as a medical condition. This perspective is often accompanied by a focus on what the individual cannot do, what can be provided to make the individual’s experience as ‘normal’ as possible, and therefore what the costs of doing so are. In cases where the disability is as a result of an accident, terms such as ‘loss’ and ‘tragedy’ are often used in an unthinking and insensitive way. This approach often presents people as passive beings who have well-meaning individuals and institutions ‘do things’ to or for them. Others would argue that a more enlightened approach is to recognise that a person may have an impairment but that it is the ‘disabling social environment’ (Buhalis and Darcy, 2011, p. 4) which prevents the individual from fully participating in whatever activity they are interested in. This is where the concept of ‘universal design’ becomes important for tourism operators. Darcy (2002) and Darcy and Dickson (2009) make the point that by having more accessible facilities

not only are wheelchair-bound customers able to utilise facilities, but so too are young families with buggies or prams, and the elderly. The argument is that if access is designed into a facility, 'rather than an add-on for compliance reasons' (Buhalis and Darcy, 2011, p. 9) then a larger number of potential customers may be attracted to a facility. Darcy and Dickson (2009) estimate that although 20% of the population have a disability, a further 3% are families with young children and 8% are senior citizens with access considerations. This means that a carefully designed facility will be accessible to the 31% of the population who might otherwise not bother to use it. Also, Woodside and Etzel (1980, p. 10) reported that 'nearly 50% of physical or mental conditions reported as limiting travel are conditions likely to be unobservable'. Carefully designed facilities would mean that such individuals would not be forced to disclose their disability in order to obtain assistance. Tantawy, Kim and Pyo (2005, p. 92) reported that 'one out of every four consumers in the UK is either disabled or has a disabled person in their immediate circle'.

A number of different terms have been used to describe this way of thinking. While initially the term 'disabled tourism' might have been acceptable along with reference to a 'disabled person', a shift in terminology has accompanied the development in thinking. Terms such as 'easy access tourism', 'barrier-free tourism', 'inclusive tourism' and 'universal tourism' have become more commonplace. Likewise the term 'people with disabilities' rather than 'disabled person', puts the emphasis on the *person* rather than on any disability they may have (Darcy, 2002). For the purpose of this paper, the researchers will use the term 'accessible tourism' (Buhalis and Darcy, 2011, p. 10).

There is some literature on tourism and physical disabilities. Smith (1987) tried to categorise the kinds of barriers tourists with disabilities face, calling them intrinsic, environmental and interactive barriers. Sen and Mayfield (2004, p. 223) discussing people with disabilities and the elderly stress the importance of 'leisure trips that serve to immeasurably enhance their quality of life'. Tantawy, Kim and Pyo (2005) investigated wheelchair accessibility of upscale hotels in Egypt. Daniels, Rodgers and Wiggins (2005) identified themes which came out of an analysis of writings from travellers with (mostly physical) disabilities and their companions who had posted comments about travelling with a disability on a website. While saying that most of the entries suggested the participants had enjoyed their travel experiences, they warn that,

'Travel personnel and tourism site managers who lack comprehensive training and information are often ill-prepared to assist individuals with disabilities' (Daniels et al, 2005, p. 919).

Accessibility and the natural environment is addressed by Lovelock (2010) who discusses the competing priorities of retaining an 'unspoiled'

natural environment with the desire to facilitate access for tourists with disabilities in the Milford Sound area of New Zealand's South Island. He suggests there will be increasing conflict between those fighting for universal right of access and those arguing for a pristine and 'natural' environment. Ray and Ryder (2003, p. 66) found that, 'the mobility challenged are sceptical of general travel agents who do not know what their needs really are'. This raises another interesting issue for management as Tantawy et al. (2005) found no evidence of hotels seeking to actively recruit employees with a disability to enhance the experience of guests with disabilities through first-hand knowledge of the challenges. Daruwalla and Darcy (2005) found that there was a gap between people's stated support for people with disabilities, and what they actually felt. They furthermore found that training improved people's attitudes, but that over time they reverted to a rather negative view. They therefore suggest that there is a difference between 'societal' and 'personal' attitudes to disability which may require disability awareness training and ongoing communication from management in tourism businesses. It is possible that this underlying staff attitude may be partially as a result of seeing their management make changes to comply with legislation rather than because they believe in it or feel it will be good for the long-term survival of their business. This makes the Darcy and Pegg (2011) study particularly relevant as it investigates the attitudes of hotel accommodation managers. It found five new 'themes' - an increasingly inclusive perspective, liability and safety, a frustration that staff would be able to help more if they were advised of travellers' requirements, a problem renting accessible rooms to those who did not request them and training and maintenance issues with 'assistive equipment'. They also found that even hotel management who did have the right attitudes, training and equipment did not communicate to people with disabilities that these facilities were available - which is very disabling in its own right.

### **The link between an ageing population and disability**

It should be obvious that many of the shifts in attitude and approach discussed above will be extremely beneficial to mature travellers who, while they may not have a registered disability, as they grow older may find participating in some tourism activities more challenging. The 'medical versus social model' discussion above is an important debate, but the focus of this paper is on the mature traveller and this very heterogeneous group does not fit easily into one or other category. This group may begin to need more medical support than earlier in their lifetimes, but may also have different requirements in terms of a supportive and secure environment, appreciate the opportunity for group travel, be concerned to be doing something philanthropic, and be very sensitive to the customer service attitudes of front-line service personnel. They may also have strong views on the technology they are required to interact with in terms of information

systems or specialist equipment. As Buhalis and Darcy (2011, p. 41) state, 'The elderly population... shares many of the same access barriers as people with impairments'. Likewise, Lovelock (2010) points out that the number of people with disabilities will increase with an ageing population. There is also some very technical research available to guide operators in what may be required. Petzäll (1995), for example, discusses the ideal design of accessible taxis which would allow people with disabilities to travel more easily.

### **What mature travellers really really want**

It has already been discussed that the so-called 'baby boomers' (those born between the 1940s and the 1960s) are in better health, better educated and more financially independent (at least in the early years of retirement) than previous generations. These travellers are not likely to be satisfied with a sedentary tour, and it is perhaps this issue that Pritchard and Morgan (1997) are referring to when they called their journal paper 'Beyond bowling and ballroom dancing'. Lohmann and Merzbach (1997) and Lohmann and Danielsson (2001) suggest that this new group of retirees is significantly different from previous generations in terms of their demands and expectations – not so much because of their age or stage in life, but because of what they have done and experienced prior to retirement. Patterson and Pegg (2011) warn that the increased interest in an 'experience' in the experience economy has not passed the mature traveller by. Indeed, they found that mature travellers showed very little interest in holidays that did not teach them something new, take them somewhere unusual, introduce a new culture, or do some good in the local community or environment. This links in with what Cohen (1979, p. 179) argued, that for some, tourism is 'an earnest quest for the authentic'. Above all, their experience had to be memorable. Cohen (1979) quotes United Nations research claiming that by 2050 22% of the world's population will be over 60 years of age (some two billion people). This group not only have more financial resources but also tend to travel for longer periods of time, often due to reduced family commitments (e.g. the death of a partner). Therkelsen and Gram (2008, p. 269) suggest that 'mature people use holidays for expressing who they are'. Vieregge et al. (2007) identify travellers between 60 – 70 years of age as the segment taking the longest vacations. This has seen the development of specialist adventure tourism operators offering safaris, rafting, trekking (or 'tramping' as it is called in New Zealand), and even kayaking and jet-boating. Hudson (2010, p. 445) warns that 'Boomers want to squeeze every last drop of their time here on earth rather than settling for an indolent retirement'. Yet while they may be more adventurous in the destinations and activities chosen, Patterson and Pegg (2011) found that mature travellers preferred all-inclusive tour groups with like-minded individuals - although research also showed that mature travellers consistently felt themselves to be ten years younger than



their actual age! Smith (1987) warns that putting the disabled or mature tourists on 'special' tours may not be a satisfactory solution as it segregates these groups from 'mainstream' society. Tourism New Zealand's theme tune to their marketing campaigns such as '100% Pure New Zealand' is perhaps very apposite for this market as it is called 'forever young'. Two terms which are often used by this heterogeneous group when describing their requirements are that travel must be 'meaningful' and 'authentic' (Fleischer and Pizam, 2002). Above all, this group does not see itself as a passive sightseer or mass tourist. Researchers quote one seventy-four year old traveller as saying about Hawaii or California, 'very nice places, but I can visit them when I get older' (Patterson and Pegg, 2011, p. 182). Lee and Chen (2011) found to their surprise that during the 'bird flu' and SARS scares in China and Singapore that there was no decline in mature traveller numbers, despite this group being identified as 'high risk', suggesting that this market segment is perhaps not as sensitive or risk-averse as some might assume. Hudson (2010) makes the point that even if a tour operator does not currently have many mature travellers, if they are good at retaining customers then they will eventually have an older client base! Ray and Ryder (2003) found their interviewees in their 60s and 70s acknowledged that 'any problems were due to "slowing down" due to age' (p. 63). Woodside and Etzel (1980) found in their study that 50% of the sample said their disability was a heart condition which was a 'restriction on effort' (p. 11). Hudson (2010) warns that 'boomers (will) redefine retirement' (p. 458) and reminds people that one-third of baby boomers are now single and the image of empty-nester couples may not be an accurate reflection of reality and therefore tourism businesses may be missing out on business opportunities.

### **Accessible tourism**

Despite what has been stated above, there are activities which mature travellers would not be able to undertake – or at least not at the level of younger people. Patterson and Pegg (2011) suggest that 'the matching of needs against abilities requires some delicate balancing' (p. 186). Operators have therefore found that such adventure activities are closely supervised by experienced guides who also provide the educational and cultural component that is important to this sector and that 'hard' days are followed by recovery days. Accommodation facilities should be comfortable (and above all safe), mostly non-smoking, and while they may not request accessible features in the bathroom, they would usually appreciate them (Wei et al, 1999). Food and beverage facilities should offer choices and be of a high standard. Mature travellers are very sensitive to friendly welcomes and considerate service, as well as good lighting and quiet dining areas. On trekking holidays it may be appreciated, for example, to send luggage ahead and travel with daysacks (as many people who walk Scotland's 95 mile West Highland Way route through Glencoe to Fort William choose to do).

Wang (2011) emphasizes the importance of realising that while this group may have certain common characteristics, they should not be regarded as a homogenous group as this kind of labelling and stereotyping is precisely what they are trying to escape from. The issue of website accessibility is also likely to become increasingly important (Williams and Rattray, 2005; Williams, Rattray and Grimes, 2006). Interestingly, Fleischer and Pizam (2002, p. 120) refer to some of this segment having a 'perceived disability', suggesting that there may be a role for travel professionals to persuade clients that they can do more than they think. Smith (1987) suggested that some people may develop a 'learned helplessness' as a result of believing that they cannot undertake a particular activity. However, as travellers' age, their physical abilities and financial resources will eventually start to diminish, and tour operators will need to be aware of this when recommending tours to people who think they are ten years younger than they really are. Finally, while this sector has more financial resources than in the past, they are more likely to purchase more expensive packages if they can see from the high quality of what is offered and the way in which it is offered, that they consider the package is good value for money.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the attitudes of travel and tourism operators towards mature travellers. The study also aims to identify techniques used by operators to build relationships with this market segment.

### **Methods**

#### **Pilot study**

The pilot study was conducted in January 2011. The aim of this stage was to ensure that the questions were not ambiguous and could be easily understood by the participants. The pilot survey was conducted with the researchers' colleagues and friends who matched the characteristics of the population being studied. On completion of the survey several questions were altered and improved to ensure ease of understanding by the intended respondents.

#### **Main exploratory study**

Following on from the pilot study mentioned above, the main study on which this paper is based was conducted in Auckland, New Zealand. Due to the time-limited access that the researchers had to research participants, the questionnaire was designed to be completed in just a few minutes. This obviously impacted on the details that were possible to gather, meaning that any findings should be regarded as exploratory and certainly not generalizable or statistically significant. Survey forms were created and then distributed to the Auckland members of SKÅL International,



the international association of travel and tourism professionals (<http://skalnet20.skala.org/>) and the New Zealand Institute of Travel and Tourism (NZITT) (<http://www.nzitt.org.nz>). Both these membership organisations have considerable numbers of travel professionals who have been working in the industry and have owned travel businesses for many years, some of whom have now recently retired from the industry. They therefore had a considerable wealth of experience which this study was specifically designed to draw on. The forms were issued at a SKÅL event with a request to complete and return them on the day. Pre-paid envelopes were also distributed for those who wanted to complete them later or for those who wished to take a questionnaire for members who were not at the meeting. The questionnaire was also e-mailed to members three weeks after the meeting as a reminder to return them and provided another copy in case they had misplaced the hard copy. As quite a number of travel professionals in Auckland are members of both organisations it was suggested the researchers e-mailed a version of the questionnaire out to NZITT members as well (one of the researchers is a Fellow of the NZITT). At the closing date twenty-three questionnaires had been returned with very detailed responses to the questions. As there were fifty people at the SKÅL event this suggests an almost 50% response rate. However, as some of the anonymous responses may have come from NZITT members who are not also SKÅL members, the actual response rate is likely to be around 40%.

A number of members approached the researchers saying they did not wish to complete the questionnaire but wanted to explain why. Reasons given included commercial confidentiality, company policy and the fact that they felt it did not apply to them as they claimed they did not have any mature clients. Finally, a small number expressed great interest in the topic but felt that what they wanted to share did not 'fit' into the survey form and offered instead to meet the researchers to share their thoughts. Their offer was gratefully accepted and a meeting was held at a later date at which a wide-ranging discussion took place which was recorded and later transcribed.

### **Instrument**

The survey form was a mixture of quantitative and qualitative questions. The first two questions collected quantitative information regarding the amount of business the company did with mature travellers and whether or not they actively sought business from this segment. The following thirteen questions were qualitative in nature asking for the participant's thoughts and advice when dealing with the mature market and reflected the interpretivist perspective of interest to the researchers. The last section of the survey collected information regarding the participant's personal demographics and information such as the tourism sector that they worked in.

## Results

### Demographics

Respondents were asked for some basic demographic data. This confirmed the researchers' confidence in the experience and expertise of the survey sample. 92% of respondents were managers, directors or owners of the business they represented. They could therefore be considered to be highly-motivated to know their client base and its needs. 80% of respondents said that they actively seek bookings from mature clients which indicated recognition of the importance of this sector. The size of the various organisations varied with the number of employees ranging from one to two hundred. Not surprisingly, the majority (72%) of respondents had a travel agency background, but there were also representatives from coach operators, airlines and accommodation providers (hotel/motel owners). Their responses are summarised below in broad themes.

### What attracts mature clients to use your company?

In answer to the question why mature clients book with the particular business respondents offered the following reasons:

*Our consultants are all over 50 and have a better understanding of the client's needs* (Travel agent senior consultant)

*(We have) senior staff with many years experience* (Travel agency CEO)

*(By) understanding their needs* (Travel agent senior consultant)

*The experience of our consultants* (Travel agent)

*Many years in the trade plus extensive personal travel over the years* (Travel broker).

These comments indicate that older staff are perhaps better able to relate to the needs of mature travellers – the ability to empathise with the clients develops a level of trust which is essential in tourism businesses. An example of this was:

*My attention to detail and wide knowledge of airlines, hotels, cruise lines brings the clients back* (Travel agent).

Another respondent noted:

*My interest in providing conscientious personal service* (Tour operator).

A final statement regarding loyalty of customers tends to sum up this question:

*Welcoming and helpful hosts able to give helpful itineraries, group and independent options ... is our point of difference* (Tour operator).

This is in keeping with comments from Huang and Tsai (2003) who note that mature travellers rely more on travel agents than any other market

sectors. Huang and Tsai (2003, p. 562) also state 'that the quality of the agent/traveller interactions, communications, overall convenience, pricing, product features and image were important issues'.

58% of respondents said the most common methods of booking for such clients is either in person or over the telephone. This suggests that mature travellers prefer to deal directly with a person rather than using the internet or other options of communication.

### **Size of group**

Interestingly, respondents noted that most mature travellers prefer to travel as couples (60%) rather than in groups (27%) or as individuals (14%). This was contrary to research by Romsa and Blenman (1989) who suggested group travel would be preferred for mature travellers as it offered a sense of safety. One respondent did suggest however:

*A lot of people who are more elderly are quite happy to do group tours as there is someone to look after them (Tour operator).*

### **Special requirements for mature travellers**

In response to questions regarding any special requirements that are needed most respondents suggested:

*Quality of accommodation and reliability of services are a main concern. Also*

*Easy access, minimum of steps, close to toilets, access, healthy meals, secure parking close to the building are necessary for mature travellers (Tour operator).*

Another respondent noted:

*My mature clients are mostly in the upper income bracket so they require personal attention with no room for errors (Tour operator).*

### **Special considerations when making bookings**

Responses regarding any special factors required by operators when taking bookings from mature travellers received the following responses:

*Ensure they are met and shown around on arrival (Hotel manager).*

*Give consideration of journey times with stopover breaks (Tour operator)*

*Sightseeing length and level of activity (Tour operator)*

*The need to ensure they know exactly what they have purchased (Travel agent)*

and the *selection of a product that meets individual requirements (Tour operator).*

These responses are in keeping with findings by Glover and Prideaux (2009, p. 35)

who suggest mature travellers ‘know the type of product and the level of service they should be able to expect’.

Many of these responses were repeated in the next question that sought information as to any special arrangements required when booking holidays for this market. Participants noted:

*We know our clients and most are able-bodied, for those not quite so I can advise them of places they can go without too much difficulty (Tour operator).*

*Reasonable stopovers and the length of travel times (Travel agent).*

There was reference to the need (sometimes) for:

*Wheelchair assistance and hotels with disabled access facilities and possibly assistance at airports (Airline manager).*

One respondent noted:

*It is the person who is taking the booking – they need to know the right questions to ask bearing in mind the destination they are going to and the difficulties they might have (Travel agent).*

Yau, McKercher and Packer (2004, p. 955) note ‘they must often rely on the advice of others regarding which places are accessible or are not accessible’. Huang and Tsai (2003, p. 570) add ‘because many senior travellers have chronic health problems, mobility emerged as a significant factor that influences travel behaviour. It is important for the travel industry to ascertain typical products and services that would encourage senior travellers to overcome their travel barriers’.

Information regarding disabilities or health issues and any special arrangements that are required by this sector drew the following comments:

*Possible heart complaints – mobility and sight issues but mostly minor age-related issues (Travel agent).*

One respondent noted that:

*Obesity is often an issue for cruise passengers (Cruise operator).*

Another remarked that:

*Travel insurance is sometimes a problem due to existing health issues (Tour operator).*

### **Negative or positive impacts of servicing the senior market**

The impact of older travellers drew the following comments:

*Sometimes agents filter them too thoroughly and do not offer them the unusual destinations as the agent thinks these clients are more sedate than they actually are (Tour operator).*

Hudson (2010, p. 445) agrees and suggests seniors 'are looking for more active travel pursuits in which health and fitness play prominent roles'. A further respondent stated:

*Mature travellers tend to be trail blazers for other 'wannabe' travellers (Tour operator).*

Another respondent suggested:

*They are loyal customers and 95% become repeat clients – you build up a lovely friendship with many clients (Senior travel agent).*

This statement is confirmed by Hudson (2010) who suggests these clients will become very loyal customers if they are targeted correctly.

A respondent added:

*After the trip the clients come and tell you about their trip and letters and cards keeping coming including emails with positive feedback (Travel broker).*

### **Advice for other operators**

Advice for other operators who are seeking to appeal to the mature market was given by the following comments:

*The older market is much more adventurous than they are given credit for, baby boomers will form the high-end segment of our industry in the next few years and must be cultivated carefully and there are very few negatives – go for it!!! (Travel agency manager)*

Hudson (2010 p. 458) also suggests as mature travellers 'redefine retirement, tourism marketers that fail to acknowledge their importance are missing out on a profitable 'market segment'. This statement is further endorsed by the Jackson report (2009, p. 16) 'The most significant development is that the tourists are getting older ... growth will be driven by older Australians in the 60 year plus category.'

Comments from another respondent suggest that:

*Businesses need to be aware of clients needs but be subtle in how you present to and communicate with them (Hotel manager).*

Another respondent noted:

*It is no use seeking to appeal to this market unless you are very well experienced and well-travelled (Tour operator).*

Hudson (2010, p. 458) suggests 'the key to securing and retaining this growing, lucrative segment is a better understanding of how they behave, their buying motivations and their needs as they get older'. Huang and Tsai (2003, p. 569) further comment 'senior travellers normally have more time and more discretionary income for travel (and) matching the interests of senior travel clients is a serious issue for travel agents (as) there is a need to identify a particular marketing strategy to reach this potential market'. Grougiou and Pettigrew (2011, p. 480) suggest 'the physical appearance of seniors is an inadequate guide to how they may wish to be treated during a service encounter, and instead service providers may need to invest time in getting to know their older customers to correctly gauge their needs and preferences'.

## **Summary**

From this research it was concluded that as a preference mature travellers tend to relate better to mature agents who have (themselves) travelled extensively and so are able to offer suggestions and personal preferences for itineraries and travel products. The travellers also prefer to return to an agent they have already dealt with for further bookings which means the agent will be aware of any medical or physical concerns affecting the client and would be able to offer suggestions that will negate any restrictions that may be experienced. Most respondents believed the personal attention to detail and spending time with clients to ensure all their requirements are covered was the main reason why clients continued to deal with the same agent.

An interesting finding was the preference of mature travellers to travel as couples which was not expected. A possible explanation could be that 'mature travellers' in this research were regarded as being over 65 years of age. Many couples are still together at this age - this could possibly change if the research started at age 70.

All respondents were extremely aware of the importance of the mature traveller market and that in time to come this sector will become even larger as people's life expectancy extends and the fact that the current mature market are more active than their parents or grandparents which will expect to result in more physically involved travel options. The mature market will also possibly be the most affluent sector of travellers in the next decade as they are increasingly tending to spend their retirement savings rather than leave it for their family. Huang and Tsai (2003, p. 571) summarise

'this market will be the fastest growing segment in the world travel market because seniors travellers have the time, money and will to travel. They tend to spend more on travel, creating a potential senior travel market that will be of great significance. The travel industry must be prepared for an explosive growth in the senior travel market'.



## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Yau et al (2004, p. 950) state that all their study respondents ‘reported that their disability affected their tourist behaviour’. Results from previous research shows that mature travellers are a growing and wealthy sector of tourism demand, although Fleischer and Pizam (2002) suggest that this is heavily dependent on two factors – income levels and health. They identify the age group 60 – 70 years of age as the one with the most potential for tourism operators. They are physically and financially more able than their parents were at that age and more interested in travelling and experiencing new environments. They build relationships with travel agents and readily accept advice and suggestions. Hudson (2010) suggests that ‘nostalgia tourism’ will increasingly feature in marketing to this segment, particularly in the imagery and the music used to support the marketing message promoting culturally sensitive, authentic, sustainable and memorable experiences. He suggests tourism operators should look at other business sectors for best practice, mentioning that this market segment ‘have embraced the Apple stores where they enjoy the attention of very well trained sales associates that are ambassadors for the brand’ (Hudson, 2010, p. 455).

Much previous research has focused on the lived experience of the mature traveller (Darcy, 2002) and their requirements, or on the facilities on offer, so this research has chosen to address the perspective of the tourism professional or travel agent – the facilitators for mature travellers to undertake such activities. The aim has been to address the gap in the literature concerning the supply-side attitudes to mature travellers. No longer are they an ‘invisible and forgotten market segment’ (Visvabharathy and Rink, 1985, p. 81) but instead they are a very important and contemporary challenge for operators. This research has shown that companies that understand the needs of the mature market will benefit from loyal customers and feedback regarding trip experiences that can then be used for planning holidays for other clients. Results suggest that this market sector is very well-informed themselves and so companies that plan to seek to appeal to mature clients need themselves to be well travelled and completely up to date with information and suggestions. This market will not accept being taken for granted. Some modifications regarding access and facilities may be required by hotels and airports. Questionnaire responses from tour operators appeared to have more specific recommendations regarding the needs of mature travellers than the responses from travel agents, so does this mean that the travel industry has not yet realised the value and requirements of this sector?

As identified earlier, this study should be regarded as ‘exploratory’. It is believed that there are opportunities for further research with various operators including hotels, airlines and cruise ships to assess their impressions of the value of this increasing market sector and how operators plan to adapt their product offerings to better cater for mature

travellers. Furthermore, this study has focused on the supply side of the tourism product, with respondents from travel intermediaries, airlines, accommodation and transportation companies. Additional research should also be conducted with the ‘demand’ side of the tourism sector – the mature market themselves - to learn of their perceptions regarding their individual travel needs and experiences from a demand side perspective. This could be in the form of interviews, focus groups and online discussion boards (mature travellers are thought to be very active users of the internet and user-generated content). Another possible avenue is to consider whether there is a particular New Zealand perspective on this topic. With no compulsory retirement age, it is not uncommon for kiwis (New Zealanders) to continue working well into their 70s. While it could be argued that this limits their leisure time, it could conversely be argued that this means their economic power to travel does not diminish as much as in other countries. Also, being so far away from everywhere, kiwis are perhaps more used to (and therefore willing to) make relatively long journeys by air and sea.

The authors would welcome correspondence from any other researchers working in this area.

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