



Alaska Travel Industry Association
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2007 ACE Program / Travel Agent Website Usability Focus Groups

Alaska Certified Expert (ACE)

Market Research for the Alaska Travel & Tourism Industry

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Travel Agent ACE Usability 2007

ALASKA TRAVEL
INDUSTRY
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ATIA Releases Results of Focus Group Study

Study Measures Website Usability Among Travel Agents

How well does the TravelAlaska.com website meet the needs of travel agents?

The Alaska Travel Industry Association (ATIA) conducted a series of focus groups with travel agents to gauge the overall effectiveness and usability of the Travel Trade portion of the TravelAlaska.com website, as well as to evaluate the ACE program concept and the associated testing modules. The trade website has never been evaluated by users, i.e. travel agents and tour operators, therefore the ATIA performed travel agent website usability research to better understand travel agents' use of destination websites and how well TravelAlaska.com meets their needs, expectations, etc. The Travel Trade portion of the ATIA TravelAlaska.com website was launched in October 2005 and currently averages 5,756 unique visitors and 44,932 page views per month.

A new component of the website is the Alaska Certified Expert (ACE) program. This program provides online training consisting of four test modules with content designed to educate travel trade on Alaska and selling Alaska. After each module a participant must take an online test and pass all modules before receiving ACE certification. At the time the research was conducted, approximately 50 individuals had been certified.

The four focus groups were conducted in mid-May, 2007; two groups in Minneapolis with a total of 17 travel agent participants and two groups in Los Angeles with 19 travel agent participants. Each respondent met the following criteria:

- Is the Owner/Manager or Alaska specialist for their travel agency
- Had not previously taken the ACE program
- Has experience in booking people to Alaska, at least three such bookings in the past three years
- To help them serve their clients better, have visited destination websites for product or destination planning information
- Have worked as a travel agent for three or more years

Participants who qualified and agreed to participate were asked to visit TravelAlaska.com and complete one of the test modules prior to the focus group.

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ACE Program Receives High Marks

In direct feedback via a self-administered questionnaire, the ACE program received rave reviews from the travel agent respondents:

- All respondents rated the module reviewed and the test taken either somewhat or very positive. Mean rating for all groups was 3.81 out of 4.
- All 31 respondents that completed the questionnaire are interested in completing the other modules.
- Nearly all (27 out of 29) respondents say they are more likely to sell an Alaska vacation after reviewing the module.
- Respondents give exceptionally high ratings for the module they reviewed. Seven of the eight factors measured received a mean rating higher than 6 on a 7-point scale.
- The testing process received an overall mean score of 4.44, with 4 being “just right.”

The vast majority of respondents are currently a certified destination specialist for at least one other destination. Some are registered with several destinations, while a few don't see the need for it at all. The primary reasons respondents give for becoming a destination specialist are to enhance their ability to sell a destination and for the opportunity for referrals.

Overall, respondent reaction to the online ACE assignment was extremely positive. Virtually all respondents are interested in completing the other modules and say they are more likely to sell and be more confident selling Alaska as a result of being exposed to the program.

ACE Program Needs More Promotion and Incentives

Travel agents are not likely to visit the Travel Alaska website unless they have a specific need, and therefore respondents recommend that the site and the ACE Program be promoted much more extensively. In addition the top-mentioned suggestions for improvement to the ACE program among focus group respondents are:

- There needs to be more incentives built into the program in order for travel agents to invest the time and effort required to become an ACE. The majority of respondents say a primary motivator to becoming a destination specialist is for the opportunity for referrals, and suggest adding a referral and/or lead-generating system to the ACE program.
- Most respondents believe that visiting Alaska is essential for ACE candidates and recommend adding special FAMs or incentives to visit the state. Some respondents feel strongly that visiting Alaska should actually be an ACE requirement, while others feel it should just be encouraged or recommended.
- Many respondents suggest adding a section of tour operators and outfitters (listed by specialty - fishing, hunting, etc) that offer package tours to make booking easier and less time consuming, and therefore more profitable for travel agents.

The ACE program and Travel Trade section of the Travel Alaska website are well-received by the travel agent respondents

Travel Trade Section Very Informative, Helpful and Well-Organized

Across all groups, respondents were pleasantly surprised at the quantity and quality of the information on the website, and the majority felt that the Travel Trade section is very informative, helpful and well organized.

The Calendar of Events, Sample Itineraries, and Trip Distances sections were a resounding hit with respondents and seem to provide the most value to them.

Although respondents value the FAM Trips and Trade Shows sections, most travel agents would not visit the website often enough for them to be timely and effective. This information needs to be targeted to travel agents in a more time-sensitive manner such as direct mail, email, newsletters or trade magazine advertising.

Some respondents do not see the need for a Travel Trade section on the website since most of the information is located in the consumer area. Overall, the consensus among respondents was to keep the Travel Trade section, but there was mixed opinions on what exactly should be included. Some like the convenience of having it all in the Travel Trade section so they won't have to go back and forth between the two sections once they are logged in.

Travel Alaska Website Does Excellent Job of Providing Information

In general, travel agents use destination websites for much the same information as consumers and the Travel Alaska site does an excellent job of providing that information.

The frequency which respondents use destination websites varies greatly. Some use them every day while others use them only on occasion. Respondents use destination websites primarily for performing research for more independent or adventurous clients, or FITs. Primary reasons for using destination sites are:

- When unfamiliar with a destination
- When can't find information through usual suppliers, existing sources, brochures
- For more in-depth, detailed information on events and activities
- To stay ahead of clients, more and more are doing their own research

Respondents say travel agents would use the Travel Alaska website primarily for FIT clients or cruise clients looking for land tours or cruise extensions. Most respondents feel that Alaska is a difficult destination to book FITs. Compared to booking cruises to Alaska, independent travel requires a great deal of work and research, most of which is not commissionable. Anything that would make booking independent travel easier and more profitable would be helpful to travel agents.

There is an opportunity to promote the Travel Alaska website and the ACE program within the travel agent community, as awareness among the respondents is very low. Few, if any, had every visited the site.