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# The *Shifting* Effect

How Marketers Can Capitalize on the Changing Group Travel Landscape

# Intro

The Greatest Generation was a boon to the group travel industry. This demographic flocked to traditional tours. They loved bus tours, wanted to be entertained and since they were not savvy travelers, a pre-planned group tour to anywhere sounded great.

As this generation aged, the industry found that baby boomers and their children didn't have the same appetite for traditional group tours. But it wasn't because they didn't travel in groups.

Learn how the industry has transitioned and the opportunities for unique group travel models in **The Shifting Effect**.



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### About the Author:

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# If it Plays in Branson...

There's no town in America that's more identified with the heyday of the group tour business than Branson. It was a destination in many ways built for the traditional senior demographic – the WWII “greatest generation.” Once they reached their golden years and had a disposable income thanks to a union pension and Social Security check, they hit the road. They longed for the familiar (old movie stars and entertainers), sought to reconnect with God and country (what better place than Branson?) and do it on a budget. Almost overnight, a tourism Mecca was born and buses arrived by the hundreds. Eventually, that core senior traveler got too old to travel. However, after a successful first act, Branson discovered that the subsequent travel generation didn't have the same enthusiasm for that type of vacation.

What played out in Branson happened across the United States and Europe, to a degree, as destinations and attractions that we built to handle senior group travelers gradually saw that business dry up. But fast forward to today and look at how Branson has shifted its marketing to portray itself to the group market. Sure, you can go there and catch an oldie but goodie, but that's not the beginning and end all of group travel to Branson.

They are aggressively promoting new shows with actors that appeal to boomers and millennials. They are pursuing student travel groups that can perform at one of their many theaters in the evening, go to the theme park in the morning and zip line in the afternoon. They have a dedicated reunion marketing department, a faith-based travel initiative and have built new

sports facilities to host youth and adult sports tournaments. Branson saw the writing on the wall and adapted its marketing efforts to reach out to these new breeds of groups.

**So can you.**



# Traditional Tour Operators Lag Behind

Swept up in “the change” were small regional tour operators and bus companies that didn’t have the foresight to adapt their marketing efforts and find a new base of customers or expand their product lines. At first they saw a gradual but eventually a substantial decline in their escorted bus tour customer base.

The fundamental mistake that many legacy operators made was in continuing to push the same mass market tour products to an increasingly distracted audience. The consumer landscape changed, but their packages and marketing didn’t. It was once commonplace for these companies to print tour catalogs 18 months out, mail it to thousands or tens of thousands of prospects/suspects and wait for the phone to ring. This “cast a wide net and reel em in” approach was successful in the 80s and better part of the ‘90s, but today it falls woefully short of success.

Some savvy tour operators understood the shifting effect and acted swiftly. Companies like Globus, Collette, Mayflower and Tauck diversified their core business portfolio by creating new products and divisions catering to special interest markets. Examples include Mayflower’s special event series, Globus’ Student Discoveries, Faith-Based Tours and Monograms (hosted trips), Explorations by Collette (small groups, young travelers) and Tauck Bridges, multi-generational group travel. These models of diversification into niche or affinity markets have helped these companies capture an entirely new type of customer while retaining a base of senior travelers. Still others like G Adventures have built \$100+ million enterprises off of small, adventure group travel.

But success in this field isn’t just limited to “the big guys.” Hundreds of niche companies and individual group leaders have started up, catering to a specific sector

of the market. Instead of trying to be all things to all people they are significant to their chosen customer base. Many of these operators fly under the radar and aren’t easily wooed up by old-guard group tour marketing techniques that are still being employed by too many destinations, attractions and hotels.





# From Age to Affinity

This entire industry has turned upside down as traditional senior groups take a back seat to travel groups that set their own agenda and don't travel by established sets of pre-formed packages. Do senior tours still exist? Absolutely. Can they be a source of business for you? Definitely. Is it wise to invest solely in this market and ignore the 800-lb. gorilla of affinity groups? We think not.

Imagine shopping for a new phone and being shown a Blackberry. That's what many niche groups faced when perusing tour operator catalogs. So, instead of buying the Blackberry tour package, these groups set out on their own – armed with a high speed internet connection to Google, Facebook friends and a lifetime of travelling experience for business and on family vacations. They started to get organized.

What types of groups are we talking about here? You name it – girlfriends, buddies, singles, divorcees, widowers, extended family, civic groups, faith groups, gardeners, music aficionados, foodies, fans, adventurers, golfers, skiers, bikers, birders, rail buffs, music buffs, buffs of just about anything for that matter. For whatever the affinity, there's a group travel purpose.



# Three Reasons Why This is Happening

1. In today's hectic, over-stimulated environment, people need a release. When presented with downtime, they often seek out their passion and as they become more involved in that passion what better way to share their interest than with a group of like-minded individuals traveling together? Bingo. Fact is, travel's more enjoyable in small groups of like-minded people – it lends to shared experiences and that's the perfect ingredient of affinity groups.

2. We don't have neighborhood like we used to. Decades ago, people lived in tight-knit communities where kids played in the street past dark, families hung out with neighbors on the front porch. With today's transient society, you likely don't know your next door neighbor other than a passing hello or goodbye. These former relationships by proximity are replaced with special interest relationships. Consider this - when you were growing up, chances are your first best friend was the kid who lived next door or across the street. But as you got older, that best friend was replaced by someone you shared common interests with. The fact that Joey lived across the street became insignificant once you got a bike. What happened to Joey happened to traditional group travel.

3. Technology enables. Remember the Internet of 20 years ago? There were a few voices (major brands) talking at you, pushing content to the masses

and actually charging customers to use their services (think AOL). As "search" became popular, consumers were empowered to go find things on their own. New doors opened and competition proliferated as technology costs decreased. Fast forward to today - who would have ever thought Facebook would draw more visitors in a month than Google and contributed to bringing down a country the size of Egypt? Amazing! In fact, if Facebook were a country it would be the world's largest. Pretty impressive!

When you think about it, it's the natural evolution of the Internet. We're not just going around "searching for stuff," we're coming to a place where we can hang out with people we share a common interest with, talk about our lives and our interests. It's the new community. So is today's group travel marketplace.

Group travelers didn't disappear, they reappeared in smaller special interest groups. Instead of traveling on a bus tour to "somewhere" with 54 strangers, they hooked up with 20 friends who enjoy theater and headed off to New York to see the latest Tony Award winner. Or a dozen girls made plans to connect in Napa for a much deserved long weekend.

# The Opportunity for Travel Brands

Seeing their conventional bus tour operator business dwindle, many destination marketers, hotels and attractions packed up and searched for the next “it” market. Big mistake. Because while marketers were off searching for fertile ground, new groups were forming all around them.

How do we know this is happening? Each and every day new groups come to Premier Travel Media to subscribe to our print magazines, niche travel guides and e-newsletters.

While historically we received the bulk of our activity through print subscriptions, today’s travel buyers are finding us through one of three sources:

1. Search Engine Optimized content/articles we have producing on group travel destinations, advice, tips and tricks. We’ve built an entire virtual library of content, whitepapers, e-books, magazines and guide that is found daily online by buyers who are searching for ideas
2. Social media posts and paid promotions targeting specific group audiences. The ability to target prospects is easier than ever before.
3. Partner websites that drive traffic to specific landing pages across our network.

While we still get a fair share of tour operator, bus company and travel agent subscriptions, groups like the above are swelling subscription ranks and driving the group travel industry in the second decade of the 21st century.

## Here’s a short list of our recent subscribers:

- The Luxury Holidays
- Sol-Seekers Travel Club
- Eclectic Events
- Travelynx
- Gardening Tours.com
- Explore God’s Earth with Joy
- Life Travel Group
- Travel Society
- Sunwing Vacations
- Grand Times
- Trips Tips N’ Tours
- House of Gypsy
- Journeys Inspired
- Live Longitude
- No Boundaries
- Porters’ Pub

# 5 Things You Must Do to Capture New Group Business

Understanding now how this business has changed, look to apply new tactics in your sales and marketing efforts to reach new group travel planners.

1. **Revamp the groups section of your website.** Freshen the look, add new packages by finding what works best in your destination and create sample itineraries around these themes. Make the group tab more prominent on your home page, encouraging traffic to this often overlooked section of your site.
2. **Help groups customize their trip.** In contrast to established tour operators, these groups require more hand-holding, but in today's "do-it-yourself" environment they probably don't know you're there to help. Step in and provide advice, using your experience and contact network to guide groups. Ask a lot of questions and provide marketing support.
3. **Share leads with your partners.** Today's groups are more likely to immerse themselves in a destination for a few days or more. Give your partners an opportunity to shine and work with these groups – chances are they will return the favor!
4. **Be Social.** Your organization has or will likely be starting a social networking initiative. Be sure that group itineraries and packages are a healthy part of your social promotion. Social networking isn't just for individual travelers!
5. **Adapt your marketing.** Are you still attending the same tired group trade shows, talking to the same tired "suspects" each year? Scrutinize your media partners – ask questions about ROI and tracking and seek out relationships with print and online media partners that are actively engaged in helping your attract niche and affinity groups.

## Summary

The question you're going to need to answer is not if, but when you start marketing aggressively to niche and affinity travel groups. While traditional group tour marketing should not be neglected, the rich landscape this sector represents cannot be ignored by any travel related business who's seeking to grow market share and revenues.

## Say **HELLO** to New Groups!

Hundreds of tips, advice and best practices on how to package, partner & prosper in the group market.

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