

Dealing with post-earthquake disruption - perspectives from accommodation hosts in Christchurch

Jude Wilson - Lincoln University

April 2013

Introduction

Research commissioned by Christchurch and Canterbury Tourism (CCT) in March 2012 found that international visitors were enjoying Christchurch, and that there was considerable interest in viewing both earthquake damage and what had been done post-earthquake around the CBD. There were, however, some issues around the quality of information visitors were receiving - particularly from accommodation providers (who have traditionally been an important provider of information and advice to their guests). A mid-2012 review of accommodation websites and more general tourism-related internet sites indicated that Christchurch tourism information had not been updated to reflect post-earthquake changes around the city. With the approaching two-year anniversary of the February earthquake, and the tourism sector moving into the second post-earthquake summer season, it was both of interest and timely to better understand the post-earthquake hosting experience of accommodation providers in Christchurch, with the aim of ultimately improving the Christchurch tourism experience for tourists. A semi-structured qualitative research approach was taken focussing on three specific research questions:

1. What has the accommodation provider experience been like post-earthquake?
2. What are accommodation providers telling their guests about Christchurch?
3. Do accommodation providers perceive there to be issues around the information available to them?

The focus of the research was on the February earthquake as it was the most damaging in respect of individual accommodation premises and Christchurch city more broadly. The earlier September earthquake did, however, also feature in interviews with several respondents noting that they had been more prepared in February (both when the earthquake struck and in its immediate aftermath) because they had been through the September earthquake.

Method

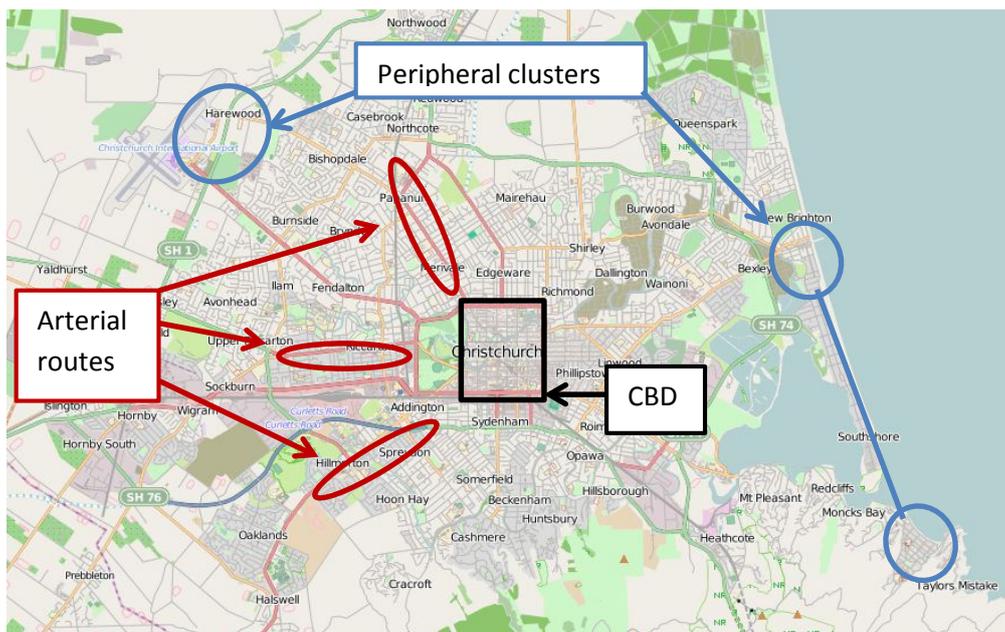
A matrix sampling frame was employed to ensure representation across a range of accommodation premise types and spatial locations (Table 1).

Table 1 Sample matrix

Accommodation Type	CBD	Arterial Routes	Peripheral Clusters
Hotels	2	1	1
Motels	1	5	2
Backpackers	3	1	1
B&Bs	2	1	
Holiday Parks		1	2
Apartments			1

Some accommodation types cut across categories: several of the motels and B&B operators, for example, also owned or managed apartments; the Holiday Parks (and one of the backpackers) also offered a range of accommodation options, including motel units. Some of the backpackers also offered private rooms. Importantly, these accommodation premises hosted the wide range of people who visit an urban destination.

The spatial locations were selected to represent the predominant accommodation clusters in Christchurch pre-earthquake. Spatial location also influenced: the degree of earthquake damage (to their own premises and immediate surrounds); the amount of disruption to local services and facilities; the extent of pre-earthquake reliance on the CBD; and, ultimately, the magnitude of post-earthquake change and disruption faced. Key spatial locations identified were areas immediately surrounding the CBD (particularly to the west, north and east), three arterial clusters on the main transport routes in to the city and two peripheral clusters (the airport and seaside suburbs) (Map 1).



Map 1 Christchurch city, showing research sample locations (Map from <http://www.openstreetmap.org.nz>)

Semi-structured interviews were employed to explore the three research questions. All interviews were undertaken in the accommodation providers' workplace. The majority of interviews lasted between 40 minutes and one hour, with several taking longer as a result of work-related interruptions.

In total, 24 interviews were undertaken during November and early December 2012. All but one interview was recorded and interview data transcribed in full. The interview data were analysed manually and a number of post-earthquake changes affecting accommodation providers were identified. From these, several key themes pertaining to the post-earthquake hosting experience were drawn. A full report will be made available when it is completed; this research paper focuses on the results from Question 3 which were of particular interest to CCT:

3. Do accommodation providers perceive there to be issues around the information available to them?

Results

Accommodation hosts take pride in being able to help their guests and ensure they have the best possible experience in Christchurch. How well they are able to do this rests on their ability to be able to respond positively and accurately to their guests' questions. For many, staying up-to-date has presented some significant challenges post-earthquake.

Accommodation hosts traditionally rely on myriad information sources in order to stay informed and to assist their guests with any needs they may have, or questions they may ask. Further, as well as informing and directing their guests, hosts often also have to counteract any misinformation guests might have been given by others, or collected themselves.

Depending on the type of information sought there are considerable variations in the usefulness and appropriateness of available information sources. Most reported that it was easier to stay up-to-date with what tourism attractions were open, as usually the tourism businesses or companies were extremely pro-active with regard to publicity; also, while many tourism attractions closed for some time post-earthquake they were perceived to have not changed structurally or in respect of their spatial locations. They were also more 'visible' and prominent in the news media. It has been less easy to stay up-to-date with regard to eating places and other general facilities and services in Christchurch. Post-earthquake circumstances in Christchurch have meant that any hospitality premises that have reopened have been very busy, and one interviewee noted that "*many places which might have once advertised a move have not bothered to do so because they knew they would be busy immediately anyway*". Further, as another interviewee commented:

"With the restaurants that are closed unless you know the person you don't know if they are alive, if they are going to relocate and where - there is nowhere to go for that sort of information."

Having adequate ‘local information’ was considered vital in respect of providing a welcoming service. Overall, interviewees reported considerable challenges in respect of the availability, usefulness and accessibility of information from a wide array of different sources. The key information sources reported and their usefulness to hosts are summarised in Table 2 and discussed further below.

Table 2 Information sources and their usefulness to the hosts interviewed

Information source	Usefulness	Accessibility & challenges
Newspapers, e.g. <i>The Press</i>	Good for local information	Difficult to find time to read; ‘Over’ earthquake news
Zest Magazine	Good for information	Useful information
Avenues Magazine	Good with up to date information	Widely read, useful & trusted
Tourism publications	Good information, but too focused	Guests often want more general information
Tourism brochures	Good information for tourists, but becoming less common	Low effort required by hosts
Restaurant menus & brochures	Clearly shows what restaurant offers	Easy to hand to people; they can then take their own time to make decisions
Lonely Planet Guidebook	‘Grateful’ for free update	Varies in ‘suitability’ & ‘familiarity’ for guests; update was a bit ‘optimistic’
Guidebooks (generally)	Not always up to date	Give visitors wrong information
Industry meetings	Some information on what is open	Finding time to attend a challenge; not always relevant information to guests needs
CCT	Good tourism information via blogs & email	Perceived to cater to certain market segments only
i-SITE	Good for tourist information; less good for local events	Takes onus off hosts; perceived to cater to particular market segments only
Word of mouth	Very useful & widely-used means of information collection, but usually needs to be verified	Wide range of ‘mouths’ - guests, friends, business associates; sometimes ‘serendipitous’
Phoning direct	Get up-to-date information	Takes time; increasingly more likely to ‘Google’
Driving or walking around	Either purposefully, or during normal life course	Time consuming - done in own time; some send staff member out to “wander”; serendipitous information collection
Local library	Good for local information	Time consuming - done in own time
Sales reps (travel companies)	Provide good brochure services; more likely to promote businesses/ companies that are regular callers	Number of visits dropped off; often based on a relationship that has been developed over time
Websites	Plethora available	Not always up-to-date; time-consuming to ‘trawl’
i-SITE website	Useful for tourism-specific information	Does not cover all information guests might want
Email	Good for targeted information	Takes time to read

Information sources

Information sources can be loosely grouped into four groups (shaded in Table 2) - the top and bottom groups are based on the information supply mechanisms being used with a range of printed sources and internet delivery options. These are discussed further below. The middle two groups in Table 2 represent a continuum of passive to active information search behaviours. Broadly speaking, one group includes organisations or locations which hosts know provide a range of mainly tourism-focused information. While useful, these are not always perceived as being suitable for the needs of some guests. The final group in Table 2 includes more active personal search behaviours by the hosts, or examples of one-on-one engagement undertaken to elicit information that is deemed useful in order to 'successfully' host. Most interviewees reported using a mixture of these information sources as they moved through a process of collecting and verifying information before they reached a stage where they felt confident to pass the information on to their guests.

Some interviewees were of the opinion that it had only been in the previous 3-6 months that information had been widely available; another noted that, while they had access to enough information at the time of their interview, that was "*perhaps not the case a year ago*". On the whole, interviewees were more forgiving of these information shortcomings in the first post-earthquake year, but "*now we need to get on [with it]*". Others returned to the fact that a lot of on-line information was slow to be updated. In the more immediate post-earthquake months, the Metro Bus website was a particular frustration for some interviewees as it was perceived to be poor performer in respect of being keep up-to-date; in reality, however, the issue appeared to be more with the fact that the bus routes were changing rapidly and hosts felt like they had lost control of their own knowledge (and mastery) of Christchurch. As one interviewee noted:

"A lot of it is word of mouth - plus you were aware of what was there before and so you try and keep in contact with that".

Overall, it has become easier over time to stay up-to-date as more things have reopened.

Time consuming

All of the accommodation providers interviewed reported being significantly busier post-earthquake and the majority were hosting different types of guests; while the change in guests did not appear to have much impact on the types of information sought, the increased business impacted greatly on the time hosts had available to seek information. For many, the biggest issue was the time it takes to find and filter information for their guests. Some interviewees reported that too much information on what was open and happening was passed on by word of mouth, and that it could be both easy to miss, and easy to be misinformed; also, in order to pass information onto their guests they need to verify its accuracy. Further, even if information is available it often has to be "*distilled and repackaged*" in order to be relevant for visitors and this was difficult post-earthquake. Many interviewees reported having 'lost' their own highly developed systems and finely-tuned resources as a result of the earthquake. Those with larger accommodation premises (i.e., employing more staff) were perceived to be in a better position to stay up-to-date through

“staff sharing information and bouncing ideas around”. Most reported spending much more time finding out what was happening around Christchurch than they did pre-earthquake.

From print to digital

A number of comments were made about print media in tourism being on the decline. One (technologically advanced) host was of the opinion that *“people don’t want rack-cards any more - websites are increasingly important”*. Another commented that they were *“going away from any form of print advertising - and we have put QR Code on the back of our business cards”*. Many interviewees also reported a decrease in the use of printed maps by their guests, and a corresponding increase in the use of GPS - however, many visitors require assistance with the use of these technologies. It was also thought by some that the post-earthquake travel and road conditions in Christchurch presented challenges even to those using GPS. Traditionally, accommodation providers have been able to offer their guests a ‘local map’ with points of interest highlighted; post-earthquake this was one resource that was sorely missed. A number of interviewees reported making their own maps, but admitted that it took a considerable amount of time and research. Most of these maps focused on local (or nearby) places to eat and general services and facilities, rather than tourism attractions or points of interest. One ‘map-maker’ noted that:

“Keeping information for guests up-to-date and making it [the number of places marked on the map] seem substantial makes them feel as if there is a lot around”.

Others expressed a desire to have a map available that showed what was closed off (i.e., the Red Zone) and what was open. Most, however, recognised the considerable challenges associated with keeping such a map updated. Many appreciated the update published by Lonely Planet and while it was widely regarded as being *“overly optimistic, what it did was take away from the doom and gloom”*.

Increase in use of technology by both hosts and their guests

There was universal agreement that visitors themselves are increasingly becoming more technology enabled as they travel. However, although people are travelling with more technology, they still seek reassurance and confirmation about information they find as, for example, they might *“look at a travel blog and still ask if I agree with it”*. Likewise, another interviewee noted that, although they encounter more guests with smart phones nowadays, these simply *“allow them to either confirm what I am saying or gives them a better indication of what they should be asking me”*.

The use of fixed-line telephones in accommodation has reduced dramatically over recent years and an increasing number of hosts provide free Wi-Fi services for their guests. An increase in the number of people travelling with iPads was described as a *“real shift changer”* with hosts having to ensure they that had good Wi-Fi because of limited antennas on iPads. One interviewee noted that *“kids are giving their parents an iPad, but they can’t use them so we have to help them with that”*. It was interesting the number of interviewees who brought up the topic of free Wi-Fi unprompted; most appeared to hold the - misguided - illusion that they were one of the few accommodation providers offering this.

Overall, there was considerable variation in how technologically advanced the interviewees themselves were. Using technology for bookings was widely considered to *“make life easier”* but only two interviewees mentioned using social media, both commenting that it is *“time consuming”*.

The internet

Although the internet offers an enormous array of information there is considerable mistrust of the information on some websites. There are also issues around how long it can take to find the information sought. For hosts it is often:

“Easier to get information online (targeted) or via emails - rather than having to [waste a lot of time] trawling [the internet] myself”.

There was widespread agreement that tourists do not always get themselves to the correct (i.e., the best or most accurate) websites or pages on websites, with some *“not even finding out that there had been an earthquake”*. However, it was recognised that the earthquake did present some particular challenges as *“people come along and say they have Googled something and they want to go there and it is not there anymore - they don’t understand”*.

There was considerable concern around the impact and power of chat and blog sites with TripAdvisor mentioned by many interviewees. However, opinions varied on how widespread its use and impact was: *“Younger people are more open to suggestions whereas older ones take what they read [on TripAdvisor] as gospel”*; *“Particular types of guests tend to put reviews on TripAdvisor”*. Another interviewee noted that the type of guests they hosted were less ‘needy’ than others with the *“confidence (and capacity) to sort own problems - they are ‘better armed’”*.

Own websites

It was interesting how interviewees maintained their own websites with respect to post-earthquake information. While most had updated their websites with details of the fate of their premises immediately post-earthquake, a considerable number had not updated any tourism information. As one noted *“initially we had that we are open and Christchurch is open, but we probably need to update the tourism information on it”*. Another noted that while they needed to update their website they had lost the contact details of their web host. Larger premises are often able to allocate a staff member to keeping the website up to date. One interviewee commented that *“websites are one of those things that either mark you out as being on top of it or not”*. Putting links to other websites on one’s own website enables hosts to keep up to date whilst keeping their own website fairly static. There were mixed views on how much earthquake information to include on websites - one interviewee noted that they *“try to have positive stuff on website”*; another noted that they had *“tried to keep away from a lot of tourist information - we just have the restaurants and what is near us - like the pharmacy and things like that”*.

Around & About Christchurch (CCT)

Altogether, 12 interviewees reported reading the CCT monthly update; five had not read it and the remaining five were not asked the question (usually because it became obvious during the interview they would not have).

While overall it was received favourably, most agreed that *“they [CCT] are just repeating a lot of the information we already know”*. Another noted that it was not really suitable for their (budget) guests and that it was *“just a giant advertisement for different restaurants with not much content”* and that it was *“a bit repetitive”*. Another noted that it was *“not really in your face that much because it is only an online thing”*. Although some reported printing it out and displaying it for their guests a few only used it as a personal resource; several interviewees reported not printing it out because they had ‘printer issues’.

What information and resources are missing

There were also comments made around what type information would have been useful to have to give to their guests. Several interviewees suggested *“some sort of post-earthquake walking trail that took people around what attractions were open and what things you could walk to and see”*. While this trail could take the form of a map, it would differ from the maps noted earlier which were notable for not displaying tourism attractions and sites of interest. Many interviewees, for example, did not perceive restaurants to be a specific *“thing to do”* for visitors to Christchurch and yet restaurants were probably the visitor service most sorely missed.

There was also some interest expressed for tourist-friendly or tourist-focused earthquake information. One interviewee commented that they would like to have more information on what the future plans for Christchurch are (e.g., the Blueprint for rebuild) in a booklet form that visitors could read. While word of mouth information was prevalent, this was often somewhat serendipitous. One interviewee commented that they kept up to date with what was happening around Christchurch because they host a lot of ‘corporate earthquake’ guests.

There were quite a few suggestions made with regard to perceived gaps in current information sources and delivery options and how these could be improved. Several interviewees were of the opinion that a medium which unified or collated information was missing:

“There doesn’t seem to be a central store of data that accommodation providers can go to - I know that i-SITE and CCT trying but it is a hard job for them as well”.

“Finding out local information is compromised by multiple community groups and the council all doing different things and there is no central noticeboard”.

“I think there is a bit of a disconnect with what’s going on in Hagley Park - loads of websites with information is great if you have the time to go in and peruse - if you just want to print out a timetable of events it is difficult”.

“A disconnect between the tourist information and the local events information - a lot of which the tourist would love to go and see and by the time I find out about it they [the tourists] are gone”.

Conclusions

Interviewees had thought put a lot of thought into what the post-earthquake Christchurch experience was like for tourists - tried to make it seem like it was still somewhere worth visiting

It has been difficult for accommodation providers because they also live in Christchurch - the physical changes in and around the city post-earthquake had a significant effect on their own systems and networks

Much of the information sought was around the status and location of local services and facilities, rather than to do with specifically tourism oriented services; this was also reflected in the number of information sources used that were generic, rather than tourism-specific

Tourism-specific information was easier to stay up-to-date with; however, as hosts these people spend a lot of their time collecting and dispensing local information and like to think of themselves as local 'experts'

However, there was a certain amount of arrogance in interviewees' responses when asked directly about their knowledge of what was happening in Christchurch; on a number of occasions interviewees reported being up-to-date and this was not the case

Providing local information is also what makes a 'good' host and for many - especially those located close to the CBD and some in the seaside suburbs - the reality was that post-earthquake 'local was gone'

While there was a move to digital delivery of information, and increasing use of mobile devices by guests, hosts are often called upon to both facilitate and direct this for their guests