

TEST PLAN:

**Branson TRIP (Travel and
Recreational Information
Program) Focus Groups and
Personal Interviews**



May 29, 1998

Prepared for:

**U.S. Department of Transportation
ITS Joint Program Office, HVH-1
Room 3400
400 Seventh Street, SW
Washington, D.C. 20590**



**U.S. Department
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Federal Highway
Administration**

Prepared by:

**Battelle
505 King Avenue
Columbus, OH 43201**

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Principal Author:

Hugh Clark (CJI Research)

Prepared for:

U.S. Department of Transportation

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PREFACE

This document is part of a series of planning documents for the evaluation of Field Operational Tests of Traveler Information Services in Rural Tourism Areas (Branson TRIP and I-40 TTIS) prepared by Battelle, along with subcontractors BRW Incorporated and CJI Research, for the U.S. Department of Transportation's ITS Joint Program Office (DOT/JPO). Electronic versions of these documents are available through the ITS Electronic Document Library (EDL):

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Joseph I. Peters
 ITS Joint Program Office
 Federal Highway Administration (HVH-1)
 400 Seventh Street, SW
 Washington, DC 20590
 (202) 366-2202
 E-mail: joe.peters@fhwa.dot.gov

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Evaluation Plan: The I-40 Traveler and Tourist Information System Field Operational Test	February 25, 1998	FHWA-JPO-99-028
Test Plan: I-40 TTIS Tourist Intercept Survey	May 18, 1998	FHWA-JPO-99-029
Test Plan: I-40 TTIS Focus Groups and Personal Interviews	May 18, 1998	
Test Plan: I-40 TTIS System/Historical Data Analysis	May 20, 1998	
Test Plan: I-40 TTIS Route Diversion Study	May 20, 1998	
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Test Plan: Branson TRIP Travel Time/Data Accuracy Test	June 1, 1998	
Executive Summary: Evaluation Plan (for the) National Advanced Rural Transportation Systems Field Operational Tests of Traveler Information Services in Tourism Areas	July 1998	

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TEST PLAN: BRANSON TRIP FOCUS GROUPS AND PERSONAL INTERVIEWS

FOR

THE BRANSON TRAVEL AND RECREATIONAL INFORMATION PROGRAM FIELD OPERATIONAL TEST

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Branson Travel and Recreational Information Program (TRIP) in Branson, Missouri, and the I-40 Traveler and Tourist Information System (TTIS) in the I-40 corridor of northern Arizona are two Field Operational Tests (FOTs) of Traveler Information Services in Tourism Areas funded through the National Advanced Rural Transportation Systems Program. The evaluation of Branson TRIP and the I-40 TTIS is being conducted by Battelle under the ITS Program Assessment Support contract with the Department of Transportation's Joint Program Office for ITS.

As part of the overall evaluation, several tests have been planned. This document serves as a detailed test plan for one such test: focus groups and personal interviews.

Qualitative data collection is planned for both phases of data collection. In the pilot phase, participants will be identified only for personal qualitative interviews. During the main phase, participants will be identified for both personal interviews and focus groups. This test plan details the objectives and approach for conducting the focus groups and personal interviews during the main phase of data collection. Details on the personal interviews that will be conducted during the pilot phase of data collection are presented in the Branson TRIP Tourist Intercept Survey Test Plan.

The purpose of the focus groups and personal interviews with tourists is to understand the nuances of the responses obtained in a quantitative way in the survey. Why did people respond as they did? For example, if they rate their satisfaction low with certain aspects of the information systems, why did they give these low ratings? What other information did they need to plan or navigate their trips? These and other questions cannot be adequately answered in a self-administered survey. Consequently, follow-up qualitative work is needed to better understand the responses given.

During the main phase of data collection, the qualitative research will have an additional purpose. During this phase, both end-users of the information (tourists) and indirect users of the information—i.e., people whose local occupational duties relate to the success of the ITS deployment, such as hoteliers, traffic control authorities such as police, operators of private attractions, and the like—will also be interviewed, for they will have a different perspective than the tourists on the impact, or lack of impact, of the systems. This is an important perspective to include in the evaluation.

2.0 APPROACH

There will be two types of focus groups and personal interviews, one set with tourists and one set with key informants who are occupationally in a position to be affected by the success of ITS. In both cases, a formal discussion guide and/or interview protocol will be developed and followed after the pilot test has been completed.

The tourists will be interviewed with one or both of two purposes in mind. They will be asked in depth about their experiences using ITS as deployed in the Branson area, and/or they will be asked to view and interact with system components (see Section 1.0). In either case, they will be asked to evaluate in their own words the experience of using the deployed systems.

The key informants will be asked their observations of how the ITS has affected the flows of traffic, the business climate, and other factors in the life of the FOT area, and how, in their opinions, it might be improved.

The preferred method will be small focus groups or triads (three persons). This offers both speed and ease of organization and the advantage of group dynamics. A professional moderator experienced in moderating such groups (Dr. Clark or a colleague) will conduct the groups. A total of eight tourist groups and six key-informant groups will be conducted.

2.1 Recruitment

Recruitment and scheduling of the key informant focus groups will be handled by the research team itself to establish rapport and thoroughly explain the purpose of the meetings. Recruitment of the tourist groups will be conducted by survey interviewers and supervisors as ancillary to the survey. In particular, after the participant has completed the self-administered questionnaire and while receiving the incentive, the Questionnaire Administrator will identify tourists for the personal interviews and focus groups. Assuming that awareness and use of ITS is sufficient, quotas and sampling intervals based on the flow rates of tourists through the interview process will be used to recruit the desired number of persons to the focus groups.

Interviewers will be provided with printed recruiting materials and instructed in selection of respondents according to their ITS awareness and use levels, as established by the screening questionnaire. As a respondent meets the criterion, and falls within the sampling interval, he or she will be handed a brief invitation to a specific group. The interviewer, supervisor, or supplementary staff if necessary will also orally invite the respondent to the focus group, and will answer any questions the respondent may have. Normally, questions are asked about the purpose of the study, whether it is sales-related, and what the subject matter will be. Staff will be trained to deal with these kinds of questions.

2.2 Scheduling Interviews

Scheduling of the key informants will begin seven weeks prior to the time scheduled for the groups. The key-informant groups will be conducted in the several days prior to the Main Phase of surveying tourists. If, during the key-informant scheduling process, it proves impractical to convene these key informants in groups, individual interviews will be scheduled and then conducted on-site, in person.

Tourist focus groups, however, cannot be pre-scheduled. Advance planning for contingencies therefore requires both a fall-back plan to collect qualitative information using personal interviews, and a mechanism to trigger the fall-back approach. Contingencies that might make it impractical to conduct focus groups include such things as a very crowded tourist season characterized by long lines and consequent reluctance of tourists to devote time to unplanned events, however brief. If, after one day of recruitment, fewer than one-half of the intended participants have been effectively recruited and attended the first day's groups, an in-person qualitative method similar to that used in the Pilot Phase of Data Collection will be substituted.

2.3 Contingency Plans

We expect to have a high level of cooperation from respondents. Attendance and cooperation will be facilitated by providing incentives, by making the groups brief, and by conducting them in convenient, air-conditioned, locations. For the tourists, hotel meeting rooms will be used. For the key informants, mutually convenient office locations or public spaces (such as hotels or restaurants) will be used.

Although we do not anticipate difficulties, it is essential to have a contingency plan because the ability to conduct focus groups, even in triads, is subject to factors beyond the researcher's control, such as the ability of key-informant participants to schedule time for the effort or the weather and level of crowding at tourist sites where recruitment of tourist groups would occur.

Depending upon the results of the surveys and personal interviews held during the Pilot Phase, the objectives of the qualitative research with tourists may have to be adapted to our evolving understanding of the tourist and how he or she relates to the ITS. Consider, for example, that it is possible that the pilot phase and subsequent system usage data for June and July could determine that the proportion of respondents who use an ITS component is likely to be very small throughout the tourist season of 1998. If this were to prove true, then no matter how scientifically sound the quantitative sample survey would be at the Main Phase of Data Collection, the "net" cast by the survey sampling would identify very few tourists sufficiently familiar with the systems to provide much depth to their evaluation of it. In such a case it may be useful to conduct test-site examinations of user responses by systematically exposing a small sample of them to the ITS components. For example, in a hotel lobby a video-tape of variable message signs could be shown. At kiosk sites, a small sample of tourists could be intercepted and asked to use the kiosk, then respond to questions. At various sites, tourists could be asked to call the 1-888-411-ROAD number to examine their response to that system. Although a "product test" of this kind is not part of the formal scope of work, it would add depth to the study if rates of use in the general tourist population were to prove very low.

3.0 SCHEDULE

As discussed in the Branson TRIP Tourist Intercept Survey Detailed Test Plan, there will be two data collection phases for the tourist intercept surveys. The first phase of data collection for the tourists intercept surveys will occur on June 26-27 and the second phase of data collection phase for the tourist intercept surveys will occur on August 14-17, 1998. The focus groups and personal interviews discussed in this Test Plan will occur during the same time frame as the second phase of data collection for the tourists intercept surveys.

Scheduling of the key informants will begin on June 26, 1998, seven weeks prior to the time of the groups.

4.0 REQUIRED RESOURCES

Table 1 presents the approximate level of effort needed to conduct this test.

Table 1. Approximate Level of Effort (in labor hours)

Project Role	Task		
	Test Activities	Analysis and Reporting	Total
Customer Satisfaction Study	35	20	55
On-Site Evaluator	5	0	5
Other Professional Staff	5	0	5