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Marketing tourism destinations in uncertain times

Successful marketing requires planning and careful execution. It is easy to become so involved in the day-to-day problems of running a marketing department that little or no time is devoted to planning. When this occurs, the marketing department is probably operating without direction and is being reactive rather than proactive. In uncertain times planning is even more critical. Business environments can change very quickly and destination-marketing organizations need to react to these changes. This requires having information on the markets segments that are attracted to the area and understanding the consumer behavior of these segments.

Long before 9/11; Sonmez, Apostolopoulos and Tarlow (1999, p16) wrote, "Every tourist destination should incorporate crisis management planning into its overall tourism planning, marketing, and management strategies." After 9/11, 60 percent of upscale hotel managers redirected their sales and marketing efforts and 44 percent revised their marketing plans (Taylor and Enz, 2002). Destination promotion agencies were also forced to reevaluate their marketing expenditures. Those organizations that did not have a good understanding of their market segments acted on instinct. Those that based their planning on research used information to adjust their plans. For example, the New Orleans Tourism and Marketing Association, working with 60 hotels, launched a \$250,000 campaign focused on regional tourists. The promotion offered travelers one hotel night free when they purchased two. The campaign featured newspaper, radio and e-mail advertisements in markets stretching from Houston, Texas to Pensacola, Florida (Claverie, 2001).

When the threat of terrorism causes concern over traveling, many travelers switch to regional destinations. Hotels should have information in their data warehouse that allows managers to identify and contact regional customers with promotional offers that will fit their needs. DMO's will need to shift their marketing focus. The Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority (LVCVA) conducted a telephone survey of 1,800 consumers after 9/11 (Levey, 2001). One of the findings of their study was that travelers wanted a reassurance that it was okay to come to Las Vegas (Powers, 2001). The LVCVA developed a new media campaign to target regional markets and provide a reassurance to tourists. According to the LVCVA, "The general messages in the new ad campaign provide visitors permission to get away while promoting a variety of amenities available in Las Vegas with an emphasis on value." The \$13 million dollar campaign was focused on regional drive-in markets and markets that were served by a large number of non-stop flights. Houston, Dallas and Chicago were included in the promotion because the LVCVA's research found that people in the Midwest considered Las Vegas close to home (Smith, 2001). Spending was cut in the east coast markets. The LVCVA also focused on rebuilding the convention business. One of the tactics they used was to provide over a million free postcards to organization holding conventions to reassure their members that the convention was going on as scheduled (Levey, 2001).

Philadelphia's research found that there was an increase in people feeling less secure about coming to cities. The city developed a campaign with the theme; "There's a time and place for everything. Make it Center City." The purpose of the ad was to make people comfortable about shopping in the city (Elliott, 2001).

The 9/11 terrorist attacks had a worldwide impact. Travel agencies in Europe reported a drop of 20% in their bookings. Tourism agencies in Mexico and Argentina declared a state of emergency. Mexico announced a \$35 million investment in tourism promotion and infrastructure to work on rebuilding its tourism industry. In Peru, visitors to tourist attractions dropped by 50%, prompting the government to cut rates of tourists' services in an effort to attract visitors from Argentina and Chile. While Venezuela announced a \$4 million campaign targeted at Canada and the United States (Online Pioneer, 2001). Australia received a double blow as Ansett, one of the nation's domestic airlines, shut down on September 14. The Australian states quickly developed marketing campaigns aimed at regional markets. Australia and New Zealand also positioned themselves as safe destinations hoping to attract Asians who were anxious about traveling to the United States (Papadopoulos, & Kris, 2001).

Hospitality consultants concluded that most organizations did not have a plan in place to deal with major environmental concerns, such as the terrorist attacks. Contingency planning must be incorporated into the marketing plans of destination marketing organizations and businesses depending on tourism. This includes understanding your market segments and the most effective way to communicate with these markets. Your contingency plan should also include a methodology for conducting research after an event to assess the concerns of the market, allowing and develop a message to addresses these concerns. DMO's that have a plan for reacting to a crisis will have a head start on the recovery process.

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