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The Destination Website Dilemma: Where Has All the Marketing Knowledge Gone?

When looking at destination marketing websites I often get the feeling that everything but marketing was considered during the design process. Why is it that destination marketing professionals suddenly seem to forget all they know about marketing their destination when they use online channels? Gone are the days when geeks were hired to put up a Website for a destination. Most destination marketing organizations have added in-house staff who are responsible for the bureau's website (Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2003). Also gone are the times when there were serious doubts about Internet penetration rates and consumer acceptance of online destination information delivery. Over 75 percent of Americans are now online (eMarketer, 2004) who use the Internet to get travel information (73%), buy or make reservations for travel (55%), and look for maps and driving directions (84%) (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2004a). Further, the latest broadband adoption figures suggest that the era when destination marketers had to worry about connection speed is almost over - 55 percent of American adult Internet users have broadband at home or work and 39 percent have high-speed access at home (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2004b). Nevertheless, we are still stuck with destination websites that are basically limited to the presentation of often aesthetically unpleasing lists of attractions and accommodation establishments.

Although most destination marketing organizations now provide information online, there seems to be a lack of commitment to making the Web a primary marketing tool. Tourism bureaus still spend a ridiculously small amount of their budget on website development and web-based advertising compared to their investment in their printed travel guide/vacation planner and their traditional newspaper/magazine/radio/TV campaigns. This lack of financial commitment unfortunately often translates into a lack of marketing commitment. One of the reasons for this reluctance toward investing in web-based marketing that comes up frequently in conversations with bureau directors is the absence of real financial incentives to do so. Another reason often mentioned is the lack of technological competence, willingness to change and vision among the many constituencies a bureau has to represent and to whom it has to respond. Yet another explanation provided for the limited commitment is that advertising agencies continue to push the familiar ways of marketing destinations. These are valid concerns that explain why bureaus struggle with shifting more funds toward their web-marketing efforts. However, they cannot be exploited as excuses for using the available funds unwisely.

The beauty of the Web lies in its ability to support creativity and reach a wide audience at a very low cost. Yet, most destination websites (there are of course exceptions) are very functional and sit passively on their servers until someone discovers them. I frequently hear that destination websites only provide basic functional information like opening hours for museums and links to

hotel websites because this is what the consumers want. Indeed, studies show that travelers typically use the Internet in later phases of the travel decision making process, when a destination has already been selected and consumer searches are better defined and focused on specific pieces of information. I would argue that this is the case because destination websites support this kind of information search best, not because consumers only want functional sites. Serving consumers' informational needs for low-level travel decisions is necessary, but if it is the only thing that destination websites do then this is horrible news from a marketing perspective. Websites have to be selling pieces in addition to being informational pieces. Nobody would ever think about putting a simple list of attractions into a magazine ad. Why do so many destination marketers think it works on the Web?

I would like to see destination websites that help me decide where to go on my next vacation, make me feel I really, really have to visit that place, help me dream about a vacation, provide me with a good idea of what the destination is about, help me anticipate what I will experience when I am there. I want websites that capture my attention as much as travel magazines do, that are fun, that create attachment to a place. These are things that destination marketers do so well in other media. It is about time for them to recognize that the Web provides incredible opportunities for persuading consumers to visit a destination. What destination marketing needs are destination *marketing* websites, not destination *information* websites.

References

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