



Destination unknown: Travel PR pros navigate uncertainties in economy, world affairs

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With a softening US economy and concerns over war and terrorism, some resorts across the Caribbean have become devoid of tourists.

When the Orlando/Orange County Convention Far Visitors Bureau began planning its 2003 spring campaign, the PR and marketing team knew that the economy was soft, and that their ad budget was the lowest it had been in five years.

But what troubled them most was what they didn't know: Would the United States be at war with Iraq during the critical spring break season in Florida? What impact would that have? And how could they make solid plans when they couldn't predict what would happen and when?

They weren't alone in asking those questions. At the start of 2003, PR pros across the travel and tourism industry were grappling with the possibility of war with Iraq, as well as with fears of terrorism and a slow economy. (At press time, the United States was not at war with Iraq.) The only certainty? You can't stand still.

"Everyone in travel and tourism is paranoid about being a potential Bali," says Lydia Graham, president of Graham & Associates, a PR firm in San Francisco with several hospitality clients, referring to last year's terrorist bombing of two Bali nightclubs filled with tourists. "But there's not much you can do about it [clients] realize that they have to market to survive."

In the case of the visitors bureau, the team went full speed ahead with a "Family Spring Break" campaign, although they re-evaluated it weekly, conducted research to help predict the impact of war on travel, and kept an alternate plan close at hand.

"The biggest challenge is the uncertainty and running all the contingencies," says Danielle Courtenay, APR, vice president of public relations for the bureau and immediate past chair (2001) of the Florida

Although travel has since rebounded, it hasn't fully recovered. According to the Travel Industry Association of America (TIA), domestic and international travel spending isn't expected to return to 2000 levels until next year. In January, TIA reported that 2002 would likely turn out to be the fourth straight year of decline in business travel volume. While leisure travel was expected to show a 2 percent increase from 2001, TIA found that consumers' financial ability to travel for pleasure is at its lowest point in three years.

But the numbers only tell part of the story. Consumers have changed their travel patterns and are redefining travel terms, too, says Rene Mack, president of the travel and lifestyle marketing practice at Weber Shandwick in New York. For example, the drive market to a destination traditionally meant about three hours for many places. Now, with lingering fears of flying and the potential for more airport hassles, places such as Hilton Head Island, S.C., have seen their drive markets extend to 14 hours, Mack notes.

Uncertainty about job stability and world affairs has also led to a much shorter booking window for both leisure and corporate travelers. "The last-minute bookings are unbelievable," says Jackie MacKay, vice president of CKPR, a PR firm based in Chicago, and a member of the Executive Committee of PRSA's Travel & Tourism Professional Interest Section. Vacationers are now booking trips about four to six weeks in advance, instead of six months, Mack says.

What does all this mean for public relations? "PR programs these days need to be extremely fluid and flexible," MacKay says. "Every day your program may be modified and changed. The key is to roll with the punches."

In addition, he says that companies are increasingly looking for those PR programs to produce measurable results and return on investment.

In cases where ad budgets have suffered deep cuts, PR folks are being asked to carry a heavier load, says Courtenay, adding that public relations, not advertising, was the focus of the bureau's spring campaign.

Tougher conditions have also forced travel PR pros to be more creative. "Programs need to be more innovative and jump out among the competition," says David Sayre, managing director of PR Works, a PR firm in Honolulu and chair of PRSA's Travel & Tourism Professional Interest Section.

Charting A New Course

So what's the ticket to success in today's more complex climate? PR professionals say they're using an array of tactics to help travel clients attract business. Here's a sample:

Crafting a distinct positioning. In representing a Fiji Islands resort, Graham & Associates faced a huge challenge after Sept. 11, 2001, because many travel media outlets stopped covering exotic destinations. How to get coverage? The firm targeted the diving market, promoting a new diving travel package along with the resort's coral reef access and rare diving rights. It also pitched local culture stories and focused on the resort's location in a more untouched region of Fiji, says Kate Rapson, account manager for Graham & Associates.

For another client, El Capitan Canyon, a campground in California that remodeled its property with luxury camping accommodations, the firm tapped into travelers' desire for drive-to destinations and family fun and coined a new travel category: contemporary camping. The campaign received coverage from The

Communications, a boutique PR agency in New York. "It's about expanding your client base," says Jean-Baptiste. "What all of us have discovered is that the South does go to the Caribbean."

Another one of her clients, the owner of two upscale hotels in suburban New Jersey, began tapping the New York market for corporate business after Sept. 11, 2001. "Before Sept. 11, it was a hard sell to get New York business," she says. Post-Sept. 11, they began promoting the properties to New York City meeting planners. In addition to creating a package with an attractive price point, they promoted the hotels' easy access by train or car. "We've uncovered this huge potential in New York City," says Jean-Baptiste.

Forming new partnerships. Teaming up with retailers and lifestyle products is another way to draw visitors, Jean-Baptiste says. Last year, one of her Caribbean clients partnered with retailer Bergdorf Goodman for a travel rewards program. "It really helped business," she says. In addition, one suburban New Jersey hotel recently partnered with an upscale lifestyle product and agreed to host a weekend exhibit.

Collaborating with competitors. In Sedona, Ariz., several hotels, resorts, jeep-tour operators and other tourist-related companies formed a consortium to pool advertising and PR dollars. "A little over a year ago, the properties here were somewhat territorial," says Patti Stuckey, owner of Stuckey & Associates, a PR firm in Sedona that works with the consortium and several area hotels. Now, hotel operators are quicker to refer a potential customer to another property if they're already booked, she notes. And they're more readily referring guests to jeep-tour operators, restaurants and other local attractions.

Staying the course. Some travel businesses and destinations have found themselves already well-positioned for today's travel trends. That's the case for Wyoming Travel and Tourism, the state's tourism agency. As home to Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming had long focused on attracting travelers looking for family time, driving vacations and Americana, says Mike Lane, director of client services for Barnhart/CMI, a PR firm that represents the agency and has offices in Cheyenne, Wyo., Denver and Santa Fe, N.M. "We're not doing anything different since Sept. 11," he says.

Going electronic. More PR professionals are taking advantage of the Web and e-mail to cut down on mailing costs for press kits, press releases, etc., says Sayre of PR Works. The Web is also a great tool for instant communication. Ken Capps, APR, vice president of public affairs for Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport, says the airport is using its Web site as its chief communications vehicle with all its key audiences during crisis situations, as well as for holidays and everyday business.

Digging deeper for news holes. With so much happening in world affairs these days, it can sometimes be a challenge to find media coverage of lighter news. Marx Layne & Co., a PR agency in Farmington Hills, Mich., faced that challenge when it was charged with promoting the Detroit Zoo's new polar bear exhibit in the midst of Sept. 11, 2001, coverage. "We went out to where we knew there would be news holes - print, feature and travel writers, and national magazines that work several months ahead," says Don Tanner, a partner with Marx Layne. In addition, they went beyond pitching travel and feature writers and placed a column in the Los Angeles Times' children's page.

Keeping close to consumers. As in all industries, using research to closely monitor the mind-set of consumers - both business and leisure travelers - is imperative in today's fast-changing times. In addition