

6 Ways to Improve Your Destination Marketing

Dear person who handles the marketing budget for your travel destination: In case you have not been reading the news, the media landscape rug has been pulled out from under you. What have you done to adjust?



I'm a travel writer who writes a lot and travels a lot. In the past year, I've had two dozen PR and marketing people working in travel tell me that their boss or executive board is at least a decade behind the times in their marketing focus. While my contact person telling me this may be clued in to what matters, the people controlling the marketing purse strings are still fully stuck in the old world they understand, namely print and TV press and advertising.

A couple of times a month, I'll get a call or e-mail from some PR person about an article I wrote for Perceptive Travel, the Practical Travel Gear blog, or Luxury Latin America - all sites I run myself. The caller needs to put together some kind of ad value report to show their boss or board because, well, that's the way it's always been done and that's the report that has to be written. If the article can't be measured in monetary terms, it doesn't matter in their eyes, regardless of how many visitors it brought to their door.

The problem is, while that may have sorta worked in the print world, it doesn't on the Web.

It was never a very accurate gauge anyway, as this article will attest: Why most magazine industry metrics are bogus (and that's from a publishing industry trade!) Anyone on the inside can tell you the circulation numbers are bogus, the published advertising rates are bogus and the demographic breakdowns are bogus.

But at least the suits are used to those particular stretches of credulity. On a website, however, this is an exercise in futility; an invitation to just make up a bunch of numbers to please the boss.

There's no such thing as a "full page ad" to value to start with. Just banners. There's no real circulation - just unique monthly visitors and page views. And how do you place an ad value on an article that people will keep reading for years, month after month? How do you value a link to your site? For someone who knows about search engine optimization, that link is very valuable. To a visitors' bureau board member who still doesn't know what a blog is, it's worth far less than a one-paragraph newspaper mention.

Everybody's heard of the Detroit Free Press, right? So it must be more valuable than being on something called BoingBoing, right? (Um, hate to break it to you, but no. It's not even close. Besides, the Free Press is the one that had to cut back home delivery to three days a week because it's a financial wreck.)

I promise you that your potential visitors, including the ones who increasingly can't remember the last time they read a newspaper, are getting their information from all over the Web and from social media. They are relying less and less on what the traditional gatekeeper people you always pitched (newspapers and magazines) have to say. Unfortunately, this means you have to work much harder now.

Your universe of 20 magazines and 50 newspapers is now a few less of those, but 100 or even 500 blogs. And some of those writers contribute to multiple outlets. You're no longer pitching an outlet, you are pitching a person: an influencer. The good news is, you get to the right influencers, you've got champions who will send you visitors by the planeload, year after year.



This requires a radically different approach and a vastly more fragmented way of spending your resources. Buying one of those silly “special advertising sections” in a general travel magazine is going to pale in effectiveness compared to spending that same amount on Google AdSense and 20 specialized travel websites.

Inviting a dozen freelance print writers on a press trip will get you spotty results over time, but inviting a dozen prolific writers who blog on subjects specific to your destination’s appeal will pay off for years and send measurable traffic to your official site.

Here are six things you can do right now to drastically improve your destination’s marketing effectiveness and pull in more visitors:

1) Figure out who is already writing about your destination and engage them the way they want to be engaged. This may be e-mail, Twitter, phone, Facebook or LinkedIn. It is almost surely not by spraying them with press releases.

2) Figure out which blogs and sites are already sending visitors to your website. (You do monitor your stats weekly, right? You do have Google alerts set up, right?) Those are obvious ad targets for the marketing people and those are editors/bloggers your publicists need to be talking with. First go thank them, and then build a relationship.

3) Spend some time researching which websites and blogs are a great match for your visitor demographics. As a cheap destinations expert, I hear regularly from and/or have been on press trips with Honduras, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Malaysia, parts of Mexico and Panama. I haven’t heard a peep from most of the other destinations profiled in *The World’s Cheapest Destinations* book or on my blog, even though I am quoted in the major media every month and my blog is one of the top 100,000 sites on the web. I’m the best-known travel writer in Nashville, Tennessee, but in a decade of living here I’ve never heard from the city’s visitors’ bureau. That’s just silly. If you run a family travel destination or attraction and don’t have Sheila Scarborough or the Traveling Mamas on your radar, you’re missing a huge opportunity. It’s even easier to target sites focused on specific geography. For some destinations there are fewer than 10 people who generate 80 percent of the search engine hits. For a place like Nicaragua it’s two or three. Do you even know who they are? Those people should be on your cell phone’s speed dial.



4) Add every relevant site to your RSS feed and visit them often. (You do have an RSS reader set up don't you?) You can't pitch to blogs if you don't know their style, tone and subject matter (or at least follow them on Twitter if that's your thing.) Blind pitching doesn't work anymore. Mass market advertising doesn't work anymore. You need to focus and converse, not broadcast.

5) Stop worrying about bragging rights. Sure, it's great to say "As featured in Travel + Leisure" when they write a few sentences about your destination on page 148, right behind the fold-out ad for Lexus, but in terms of influencing travelers to visit, did it matter? Was that one-page magazine ad that ran for one month really more effective than advertising on 20 very well-matched websites or blogs for an entire YEAR? Focus on the actual objective, not on what sounds impressive on a report.

6) Listen to your people at the bottom. The most junior people in your organization probably already know what needs to be done. They don't have your built-in preconceptions and prejudices and will always be two steps ahead of you. Give them a budget, stop worrying about whether they are "wasting time on Facebook," and turn them loose.

If you still have questions after reading this, let's get together at Travel Media Showcase or Visit Europe Media Exchange (VEMEX) or have a drink in your destination's best pub. ("Will work for beer.")

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