

Marketing travel in tough times

By Peggy Bendel

It's summer, the most important season for travel. Given our "perfect storm" of current economic woes, how can communicators possibly market a destination, property or attraction?

The price of gas is rising every day. Food prices are also escalating, hitting consumers' wallets and restaurants' bottom lines. The dollar is in the doldrums against every other currency. Falling house prices has put an end to tapping home equity for other purchases, including travel. Airlines are cutting service to airports across the country. Even Las Vegas has added a call to action to its legendary "What happens here, stays here" campaign this summer with "Vegas Right Now!" Really, could it get any worse?

The good news is that vacations are now regarded as a necessity, not an option, for almost everyone. Though there's much talk in the media, travelers won't be spending the entire summer in their own backyard. They may, however, drive shorter distances, stay away a shorter time than usual, bunk with family or friends instead of booking a hotel, choose less expensive accommodations than usual, cut back on restaurant meals and budget less for admissions and souvenirs.

Here are examples of what travel marketers around the country are doing to make the best of our current situation.

Address the challenges

As communicators, we must adopt a mindset of attacking our problems head-on if we want to overcome our economy's current barrier against travel. For example, gas card promotions are the most direct tactic to moderate the "pain at the pump," a major issue despite recent statistics in *BusinessWeek*, showing that rising prices add less than \$100 — even with an SUV — to most typical trips.

Mississippi Gulf Coast radio, print

and outdoor campaign, "Come Back to the Coast," is giving out free \$50 gas cards to customers within a 300-mile radius for two-night travel stays completed by Labor Day. Hershey Entertainment and Resorts has partnered with Lukoil to offer \$50 gas certificates on selected accommodations and admissions packages directed at families and couples. Visit Pittsburgh has its "Get Here and Get Going," campaign, offering a \$10 gas card for every night's stay. Hotels.com also offers a \$50 gas card in its TV campaign.

A word of caution: if you're not a drive destination — for example, Denver, where most travelers arrive by air — gas cards won't do the trick.

Think globally

For those with an appeal to international visitors, the current exchange rates for every major currency, including the Euro, the pound and the Canadian dollar, make the U.S. a true bargain for international visitors. European and Canadian travelers usually stay longer than domestic travelers, with more generous vacation time, and are now buying empty suitcases and filling them with everything from electronics to sheets and towels, as well as more traditional souvenirs.

While it's late in the game to launch a print marketing campaign internationally, the power of the Internet and social networking, and partnering with online travel agencies, tour operators or other entities can really provide a boost.

Act locally

Florida has long regarded their primary summer market as other Floridians. In Miami alone, attractive rates, extra nights free, rounds of golf or spa treatments, late checkout and food and beverage credits are designed to lure nearby travelers, at a fraction of the winter rates. And "Miami Spice" and "Miami Spa" promotions highlight restaurant and relaxation values, too.

Highlight your major assets

If you have anything new — and especially if you have anything for free — shout it out loud. St. Petersburg/Clearwater, received accolades this summer from "Dr. Beach" and TripAdvisor.com. Already planning to market heavily to the Orlando area, both to reach that nearby nexus of travelers and to address the gas crunch, the St. Petersburg/Clearwater CVB featured

that exciting news with a campaign triple the size of their usual budget at \$1 million, and trumpeting "America's Best Beach is only 90 minutes away!" on billboards, in newspapers and radio.

Near the Sheraton Wild Pass Resort and Spa in Arizona, the first LEGO store in America is opening. The hotel's celebratory family package includes free admission to its on-site LEGO-designed Kid's Club, and a \$25 LEGO store gift card, among other features.

Target, target, target!

Who's your customer, what do they want and who influences them? While these are the most basic of marketing questions, there's no more important time to know the answers — which may not be the same as just six months or a year ago.

Peer-to-peer travel advice sites — not just TripAdvisor.com, but through sites such as Facebook, where the connections are often closer and more credible — reflect the importance of "people like me" in decision-making.

The proliferation of new media such as Twitter, and new marketing applications such as opt-in mobile messaging and texting, can produce business swifly for certain businesses. Vegas.com is boosting sales of show tickets with mobile offers, including a link to its 24/7 call center to complete the sale. Even before the official launch, more than 100 sales had been stimulated in just a few days.

Plan ahead

Summer's the priority now, but fall's just a few months away. If you're not a fall foliage destination, how will you bring visitors this year?

An unprecedented 64% (more than \$2 million) of the Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau media budget is targeting visitors from around Florida, focusing on Tampa Bay, Orlando, Miami and Fort Lauderdale. It has developed what's intended to become an annual event, Islands FallFest, to boost travel after Labor Day through November 15 by promoting many of the events and festivals happening during this time and featuring special hotel offers.

And above all, remember: "This, too, shall pass." As travel marketers, challenges are our daily bread. We know there will be more: what keeps our lives interesting is not knowing what the next one will be!

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