

Revitalizing Ontario's Tourism Image

HOW THE MARKETPLACE IS DEFINING THE FUTURE OF ONTARIO'S TOURISM

By: Kenneth Caplan

The Psychology of Change

If you cut through all of the various reasons why people take vacations or pursue tourism activities of any kind, the single underlying feature is the desire for change — change from the pace and routine of life; change for the sake of new experiences; change for the opportunity to expand knowledge and understanding of the people, places and customs that define who we are in relation to others.

Probably the most successful purveyors of change in the world of tourism are Disney Corporation and Club Med, both of which have created formulas that transport tourists and vacationers to settings where time is inconsequential, where most responsibilities are catered to or eliminated, where the image of enjoyment is high concept and where fantasies replace the realities of life. Each of these enterprises has developed a unique way of packaging its products and promises, and each is a master in the art of delivering change.

Ontario's tourism industry is at a watershed in its evolution. Global market restructuring and advancing technologies have triggered a recession that is propelling changes in virtually every business sector. As tourism businesses chart their ways through these difficult times, they are encountering far stiffer competition, a more discriminating customer base, and changing lifestyle values in the population at large. For Ontario's tourism sector, a quantum leap into the market-driven business realities of the 90's is now essential.

A Global Perspective

We live in a global village, as Marshall McLuhan put it. Today's travellers are better educated and more informed than ever before. They are electronically "tuned-in",

conditioned by slick marketing, and equipped to make value judgements based not only on their grass-roots experience, but on international travel as well. To live in a global village means that even the smallest Ontario community is a competitive player on the world stage.

Tourism is a high visibility business. Just as consumer products compete on a supermarket shelf for recognition, towns and cities now strive to achieve awareness in local, national and international markets. For tourism, the strategies of image packaging have become a prerequisite to effective marketing and an essential positioning technique to register the "must-see", "must-do!" concept in the minds of customers.

In order to push the "hot buttons", tourism marketers have to reach beyond the practicalities of information to create more visceral relationships with their customers locally, nationally and internationally. Club Med for example, urges its clientele to leave their money at home and be free of responsibility in a cash free resort. What better "hot button" to push than financial freedom?

Club Med originated to provide a basic vacation opportunity for French army veterans and their families after the second world war. From that concept grew today's international vacation giant, and although Club Med is now comprised of resorts that offer every conceivable luxury, the most aggressively promoted aspect of Club Med's image continues to be the quintessential grass hut on a desert island. Facts are not reality. Perception is!

The Image Package

Tourism is an industry in which the products and the providers must present a unique point of view both in image and substance. Beginning with the develop-



Kenneth Caplan, President of Kenneth Caplan and Associates Limited, is an Image Management consultant specializing in corporate and public sector marketing. A graduate of the

Ontario College of Art and a past President of the Society of Graphic Designers of Ontario, Kenneth Caplan has been instrumental in shaping the visibility of businesses, institutions and public sector organizations in Ontario and across Canada. A recipient of numerous awards, he has crafted image programs for TD Bank's Green Machine, The Toronto Stock Exchange, The Canadian Cancer Society, the City of Thunder Bay, North York, Dundas, and Blind River among others. A frequent lecturer on marketing at the Ontario College of Art, Kenneth Caplan has also served on the judging panel of the EDCO marketing awards.

ment of a strategic plan, the image package must be designed to include a strong identity, theme and rationale, a means of involving the consumer with the product, and an invitation to "buy-in".

From the point of view of public sector tourism, an image strategy acts as a beacon to the marketplace to promote the features, values and advantages of the destination. It also provides the public visibility and sense of common purpose that is essential to gain the support of constituents for the objectives of the program.

While it may be true that the same level of financial resources are not generally available to public sector tourism planners as to consumer product marketers, the same planning techniques apply.

One of the growing problems for tourism planners is an ability to keep pace with changing consumer preferences and emerging trends that are shaping the future. While many studies are conducted to obtain quantitative data, not enough attention is paid to motivational research, the science that explains the underlying reasons for consumer behaviour. This type of research is essential if tourism planners are to develop market-driven products and services.

Using Niagara Falls as an example, studies show there is a growing demand for educational and fantasy experiences among

tourists. In view of that, consider the possibility of a virtual reality attraction in which tourists are transported from the Maid-of-the-Mist, to a multi-media and electronic sensory tour of the Falls' primordial development, complete with prehistoric creatures. Or what about the development of Niagara Falls as a world centre for ecology studies? The Falls itself is high concept...the challenge is to package it that way!

From Excess to Value

The 1980's was a decade of excess. The 1990's is a decade of value. Tourists, regardless of age or income level are committed as never before to obtain "the best buy". This doesn't mean the lowest priced product or service but the best value.

The economies of scale available in the American market that make for low prices and product diversity do not exist similarly in Ontario. Therefore, our tourism industry must be able to compensate with added value in the service sector. Today in Ontario this compensation is lacking. The task of changing this aspect of Ontario's tourism productivity is daunting because service is attitudinal, and has to be nurtured and developed at the grass roots. What is required is no less than a new hospitality ethic in Ontario with the necessary training and re-education to make it so.

Substantial improvements in tourism business could result from a concerted effort on the part of every level of the industry to make service the operative strategy of the nineties. Here are just a few reasons according to David Thexton a noted tourism research consultant;

1. With less disposable income tourists have less tolerance for poor products or services but will tend to put their trust in known attractions and destinations where product and service value exists.

2. Since most vacationers do their planning in the midst of hectic daily routines the tourist marketer or operator who pays attention to customer convenience will be the winner whether in booking vacations, easy check-in at airlines, car rentals or resorts.

3. While many hotels and resorts are geared to one or two week packages, the pressure of life in the 90's is making it more difficult for families to co-ordinate vacations for that length of time. Three and four day getaways are becoming a preferred option and that means more concentrated

services for customers.

4. Think about a return to earlier types of value-added services such as grocery carry outs which many food markets used to offer. Seniors, more than any other consumer segment recognize service and are prepared to reward it with customer loyalty and word of mouth advertising.

Eco-Tourism and the North

Value and service can be manifested in many ways. In the past, travel to northern Ontario was restricted to avid campers, hunters and the more committed types of nature enthusiasts. Today with the natural environment disappearing at a rapid rate, more and more vacationers want to see the great green north before its gone. The attraction of eco-tourism, relative to travel cost is now changing in favour of Northern Ontario.

What are the unique attributes of northern Ontario communities? What are the values that need to be promoted? How can towns and cities in this region maximize their financial resources and marketing outreach?

For larger communities such as Thunder Bay the process has taken the form of a new city wide tourism strategy and image program involving public meetings, a structural reorganization, and an aggressive visibility campaign under the theme "Superior By Nature".

For smaller towns the development of a regional strategy in conjunction with other communities may be the right solution to create the critical mass necessary for effective marketing.

Ontario as a whole is in an enviable position to provide ecological experiences. It has the natural resources and established image world wide on which to build. What is needed now is a unique proposition to bring the world home to Ontario.

Seniors on the Move

There is a totally new tourism strategy yet to be shaped that will address the vacation aspirations of Ontario's seniors. Never before has there been such a large percentage of senior vacationers, travellers and adventurers looking for new experiences and with the money to enjoy them. Consider for example, resorts and camps that offer bird watching field trips. Bird watching is the fastest growing recreational activity in North America with more than 80 million participants in the US alone. Glid-

ing, ballooning, music camps, folk art retreats and pet training camps are other examples which can deliver distinctive vacation experiences for seniors (and their extended families). The spin-off business for local communities surrounding these resorts and attractions can be substantial.

The Euro-Rail Concept

One of the chief impediments to vacationing in Ontario is the high cost of travel. Perhaps a program such as the Euro-rail Pass should be instituted that would discount hotel /motel rates for travellers who book multiple stopovers with the same hotel/motel chain in advance. Lower, pre-planned rates would provide greater security for tourists and encourage them to visit more of the province.

Country Chic

For smaller communities the changing demographics in Ontario represents the spring board to revitalization. The hectic pace of large cities like Toronto, the high cost of living, increasing crime and a deep seated desire to return to more fundamental values is attracting a growing number of people to small town living. As Boomers pass the growing years of their families, they too are trading down from the excesses of the '80's to more values-oriented lifestyles, buying country homes and in a growing number of cases combining leisure living with work environments.

This move to the country is the cutting edge of changes being brought about by the information-age economy. And, as small town factories cease operation or relocate, new business niches are developing for which small communities are admirably suited such as architectural practices, engineering offices, specialty boutiques, custom manufacturers and even software companies whose electronic links enable them to locate virtually anywhere. The challenge will be to mobilize existing resources and take advantage of the trends that are shaping the economy and changing the Province. □