

Destination Marketing 3.0

A Look Back – and Forward – As “I Love NY” Turns 30

BY PEGGY BENDEL



Unquestionably one of the most iconic travel marketing campaigns to have been launched in the history of the tourism industry, New York State's continuously successful I Love New York campaign celebrated the 30th anniversary of its launch on Valentine's Day. (And from the beginning, it was for New York State, not just NYC – though many still don't recognize that.)

For those of us who remember the excitement of watching skyscrapers in Manhattan and Albany light just the right windows to create that now-famous logo, it was a never-to-be-forgotten moment – and seems like “just yesterday.”

In fact, it is light years ago, in terms of the increased sophistication of today's travel marketing, so this seemed the perfect moment to reflect on five broad areas that are vastly different today, having undergone sweeping transformation – and one that hasn't. Yet, despite the changes in travel marketing – the message is as relevant today as it was 30 years ago.

Let's go back to those days of yesteryear:

1. Communications: The Power of THE INTERNET

In capital letters, to denote its profound effect on destination marketing, the Internet has clearly impacted nearly every aspect of our daily lives, and not least of all, how travel – both business and leisure – is marketed today.

Incredible as it seems, there weren't personal computers or fax machines: an IBM Selectric typewriter was state of the art, and the mailman (and most were men) brought colorful travel brochures to the doorstep, in response to clipping and mailing a coupon from a newspaper or magazine.

In the era of three networks, and a handful of travel magazines (yes, life before Conde Nast Traveler!), creating a marketing plan, an advertising schedule that achieved substantial critical mass – and stretching a few million dollars – seems like child's play, in retrospect.

Of course, nothing still outsells word-of-mouth recommendations from friends and family, as we heard from Dennis Marzella

at the April 25 ATME luncheon in New York.

And not surprisingly, there are a growing number of tools on the Internet that can even approximate that, from Dennis' example of ThisIstheLife.com – sponsored NOT by a destination or travel-related entity, by the way, but by Chivas Regal – to tripadvisor.com (where, as I write this, their banner notes “11,389,535 Travelers From 188 Countries Planned Trips Here This Week!”) and blog aggregator realtravel.com.

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Better than watching those seemingly endless slide shows of yore over onion dip and chardonnay in friends' and neighbors' shag-carpeted rumpus rooms, these sites are rich in content, from “Top 10” lists, to photos of wonderful or disastrous experiences, making decisions easier and recognizing two needs of today's travel: time compression and instant gratification.

While the reviews are regarded as pretty reliable, I expect the ‘net-savvy traveler of tomorrow will want even more assurance their hard-earned dollars will be well-spent: perhaps a credibility rating similar to those which eBay sellers receive from happy - or dissatisfied - buyers.

And if you really DO want to watch the modern-day equivalent of those slide shows,

the kids have probably uploaded them to flickr.com or another photo-sharing site, often while they are still on vacation – instant word of mouth!

2. Increased professionalism

Travel and hospitality marketing degree programs, such as those at George Washington University, NYU and others didn't exist in 1977, let alone the continuing education and high-level conferences that now take place year-round and worldwide.

Now, a quick search (yes, the Internet again) brings more than 1.26 million citations for “Travel and hospitality marketing degree programs,” from Johnson and Wales' Global Tourism Management bachelor's degree program to Florida International University's Graduate Certificate in Hospitality and Tourism Management, and from certificate and Associate degree programs to Masters degrees.

This rich source of motivated and trained staff is an invaluable resource for our rapidly-growing industry, and quite a change from the early days when your willingness to work nights and weekends at trade shows and travel agent seminars was an important criterion (hmmm: that really HASN'T changed!).

Bolstering the classroom instruction, many such degree programs incorporate hands-on experience in the industry: and as we all know, that's where the real learning will take place, and will mitigate our need to introduce recent graduates to the real world.

The continuing education provided by ATME, DMAI, PRSA and a wealth of other industry organizations, through conferences, teleseminars and podcasts, helps keep that knowledge updated, despite the ever-constant challenge of too much to do in too little time with too few resources.

3. Branding for one and all

As relatively sophisticated as the I Love New York campaign was – and a testimony to its power is its longevity, exceeded only by “Virginia is for lovers” – it was not intended as a true branding exercise.

Based on sound research and drawing together the top talent of the day – from Milton Glaser, still an iconic figure in the world of design, who created what may be the world’s most recognized and imitated logo – to Wells Rich Greene whose memorable television commercials won every award in the book – the original I Love New York campaign was actually designed to overcome the negative perceptions of New York City and State in the mid-70s and to jump-start the State’s lagging economy as all those “good manufacturing jobs” were flowing first to the South and then beyond our borders. (Remember THAT gas crisis? And the classic New York Post headline “Drop Dead!” which was President Ford’s response to the prospect of a bankruptcy bailout for New York City?)

Today, the recognition that a clearly articulated and communicated brand is essential in differentiating a community, an airline, car rental firm, a hotel chain or individual property from its competitors is well-recognized.

But there is still a dearth of truly great and distinct brands, and of the acceptance by top management that a brand isn’t just a logo and tagline, or a knock-your-socks-off advertising campaign. The process – which can consume six to twelve months up-front – of in-depth research with appropriate audiences, development and testing of a brand identity and community and trade education that sets the stage for a lasting brand still seems a challenge for many...but the rewards are great.

4. Increased competition

In 1977, New York State saw itself competing within a limited arena: for its upstate “mountains and lakes” segment, the nearby states of New England, New Jersey and Pennsylvania were seen as the primary competitors for that then-sacrosanct two-week family vacation.

Today, the world is easily accessible to any passport holder, and with the new passport regulations removing a long-standing barrier to international travel for many, I predict that we will see an upsurge in well beyond the trips to Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean that prompted so many to storm the passport offices in the past few months.

The siren song of those empty passport pages, combined with lure of reasonable airfares and the ability to find just the right accommodations (yes, of course on the Internet), a long weekend in Northern Ireland or Venezuela is just as accessible to a New Yorker as a ski weekend in Vermont.

This is a threat barely perceived by most domestic destinations: and an opportunity for MANY international marketers. No one seems to be capitalizing on either as yet: stay tuned!

Those products still exist, of course, but the broad market segments to whom the original I Love New York marketing was addressed have fragmented and recombined in ways impossible to have imagined in those early days, not to mention the proliferation and fragmentation of the media – print, broadcast/cable/satellite radio, and now online - to reach them.

Girlfriends getaway, European river cruise, extended family vacations to Australia and New Zealand, Patagonian adventures, backroads travel across the US,

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5. Increased segmentation/fragmentation/proliferation

Research in 1976 and 1977 indicated that New York State had two primary products:

- New York City, for which the main lure was Broadway theater, followed by museums and shopping, and which was shown to appeal primarily to couples, and
- “Mountains and Lakes,” exemplified by the Adirondacks, the Catskills, the Finger Lakes and more, and which was of particular appeal for families.

a long weekend in Northern Ireland: I’ve experienced them all within the past 12 months, and I’m far from unusual!

Zip code marketing won’t track me down any more: my retired husband (who joined me on only three of these trips) and I live in a NYC high-rise on the same floor with a young couple and a new baby; a single airline Air France flight attendant who lives in France with her husband most of the year; and two recent college graduates whose loud parties we tolerate because they’re such nice guys.

Our vacation patterns are equally disparate, making those of us in zip code 10016 quite the challenge for any marketer. For

example, I don't subscribe to magazines and newspapers at home, though I read them regularly, both at the office and online – and I couldn't afford to subscribe to all of the publications that I read EVERY day from around the world.

Yes, the Internet will help, as will good database marketing from the destinations and properties I've visited, the airlines I've flown, the rental cars I've chosen.

As an active traveler, I'm amazed at how little custom e-marketing I get, encouraging me to return to someplace I've already enjoyed, or to tell my friends who would be interested in my recommendations: why aren't I hearing from that lodge in Belize to which I purposely gave my e-mail address? How about that delightful restaurant in San Francisco? Send me a coupon for a friend who might be going there, and make both of us happy, taking advantage of that all-powerful force, word-of-mouth, to overcome the hurdle of finding new customers in the morass that is today's over-cluttered marketplace.

The take-away here, of course, is that while we may have the technologies literally at our fingertips, we still have to embrace them to the fullest extent possible, starting with these very basic actions.

What HASN'T changed (but I wish it had!)

Why is it still a struggle to convince legislators and other non-travel industry decision-makers that tourism is a powerful economic engine for almost every city and country on the planet!

Australia's leading tourism lobby group, the Australian Tourism Export Council (<http://www.atec.net.au/>) has just issued a White Paper titled "The Missing Link" calling for the funding of a new non-political body to drive and coordinate national industry development and policy on a range of issues. It's an interesting read, available at: <http://www.atec.net.au/uploaddocs/editordocs/Missing%20Link.pdf>

According to Roger Dow, President of Travel Industry Association (TIA), the United States Congress is still poorly-informed about the impact of our \$1.3 trillion U.S. travel industry. Anyone who

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works for a State or local destination, and depends on bed tax collections or legislative appropriations knows that is, by and large, true on that playing field as well.

Let's work together to change that, and make the transformation complete, as destination marketing 4.0 takes shape!



Peggy Bendel, Senior Vice President/Travel Marketing of Development Counsellors International, was a key staff member during the development of the "I Love New York" campaign. She joined DCI, the leader in marketing places (www.aboutdci.com), to handle PR for the Australian Tourist Commission's "Come and Say G'day" campaign, and has worked with more than two dozen US and international destinations.

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