

WHHSH

("What Happens Here Stays Here")

Story

BY ROB O'KEEFE



A few months ago I spoke at a travel conference about the “What Happens Here, Stays Here” ad campaign for Las Vegas – I covered the strategy, showed some ads, results and took some questions. Afterwards, someone approached me and with a cynical expression asked what the *real* secret was – “tell me the truth, how did you really get that campaign made in the first place?” As we enter the fifth year of the campaign it’s a good point to reflect upon.

I wouldn’t call it a secret, but in my experience the difference between break out creative and mediocrity is this – lose the fear. Uncommon success requires uncommon thinking and the willingness to embark on a new path. Let’s face it, there is a lot of travel and tourism advertising that shows pretty pictures and promises you’ll see/experience/discover/explore a real good time. Las Vegas has done some of this in its history. But to really get noticed, you need a bigger idea – and for Las Vegas that meant fully embracing a brand driven approach.

Fear is kryptonite to the super ad campaign – an iceberg to the unsinkable big idea. The key ingredient is being able to stand for something, to not try to be something for everyone, to go to the edge. That means deciding what you are – and *what you are not*. And that can be scary sometimes, but that is how great brands are built.

Of course, there’s a lot more to it, but after painstakingly developing the strategy, writing a rock solid creative brief, running through tedious focus groups and finalizing the idea – someone still has to sign off. That’s what it came down to with this campaign. My agency, R&R Partners, has a 25 year relationship with the Las Vegas Convention & Visitors Authority (LVCVA), which certainly helps when presenting a risky idea – but let’s just say with the original concept we were on the thin end of the limb.

The Business Challenge

Go back to Las Vegas in 2000. The city had just shy of 125,000 rooms and was coming off a decade long growth spurt. In 1990, the destination had less than 74,000 rooms – so in ten years the room inventory increased by almost 70%, and not a single year in that timeframe saw annual city-

wide occupancy below 80%. Hotel-casino developers apparently thought if the 1990s allowed for that kind of increase in supply being matched by a commensurate increase in demand plus an increase in revenue (visitor dollar contribution increased by more than 100%) – “let it roll” seemed to be the mantra.

Into the new century, it became clear the development boom in Las Vegas was still picking up steam with new properties such as the Wynn, expansions at the Venetian and Caesars, and mega-developments such as MGM/Mirage’s Project CityCenter and Boyd Gaming’s Echelon coming on line within the next decade. With this continued investment came the expectation that the

It was not lost on us that while the destination saw terrific growth and success during the 90s, competition was less a factor. Indian and other competitive gaming was gaining ground but had not yet blossomed. After years of smooth sailing, the cruise industry began a significant growth spurt in the late 90s – according to CLIA (Cruise Line Industry Association) the 2-5 day cruise segment grew by a whopping 869% between 1980 and 2005. Clearly, the year 2000 represented a competitive turning point for Las Vegas. There were more players in the ‘tourism economy’ and many of them openly declared their intention of going after a piece of the Las Vegas tourism pie.



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The Marketing Approach

For Las Vegas to remain one of the world’s most successful tourism destinations a new approach was required. The basis for a lot of tourism/travel advertising is features and benefits – show pretty pictures and guarantee a good time. What was needed was a shift to a brand-driven approach that would define the Las Vegas experience based on an emotional connection between consumers and our destination. After all, ‘brand’ really exists in the hearts and minds of consumers. We needed an emotionally charged advertising campaign that would tap into both. Here’s the approach in three steps:

city would continue to draw new demand and maintain mid-80ish occupancy with increasing revenue. The organization tasked with driving demand is the LVCVA and as their ad agency – we felt the heat too.



1. **ACCOUNT PLANNING** – you can't spend enough time speaking with your customers. Not just talking to them, but interacting with them. Learning not just what they say, but what they actually mean. Finding out not just what they want, but what they need. This is the essence of account planning and we went through an extensive 18 month process engaging consumers in search of the *One Thing* – the single truth that is relevant, compelling and is the building block to defining the experience your destination offers. Consumers told us time and time again that in Vegas they feel like they can cut loose like nowhere else – this was a key insight to build on.
2. **BRAND POSITIONING** – You might have heard that if you can't boil down your brand to three words you're not trying hard enough. For Las Vegas we boil it down to two words: "Adult Freedom."

This is the essence of the Las Vegas brand and sets up our positioning statement – "Adult Freedom means Las Vegas is the place where you do things you can't or wouldn't do anywhere else." This is the guiding principle for the entire marketing effort.

3. **"WHAT HAPPENS HERE, STAYS HERE"** – your brand is not simply your ad campaign, rather the campaign is the articulation of the brand. In our case, we needed something that not only conveyed "Adult Freedom" but actually encouraged it. Something that gave consumers permission to enjoy themselves in a way they don't do elsewhere. The "What Happens Here" campaign became the means of delivering the brand message and reflecting the Las Vegas experience.

Sure "What Happens Here, Stays Here" (WHHS) is provocative. Las Vegas

has always been provocative, sexy and suggestive. All we did was tap into what Las Vegas has always stood for; we packaged its fundamental brand truth. But it was still scary. Even after all the homework, the focus groups, countless iterations of creative concepts – the final campaign was met with more than a little trepidation. The initial presentation of the advertising to hotel stakeholders was met with a daunting silence.

Where were the gorgeous hotels, the fabulous spas and pools, not a single Cirque de Soleil dancer? Instead the first television spot involved a very seductive woman taking a limo ride to the airport who upon exiting the limo had transformed from her 'Vegas-self'. Even with the planning and customer insights to back up the creative approach it was a tough sell. We shifted from showing what Las Vegas has to the attitude that Las Vegas represents – ultimately a much more compelling proposition. So with much

hand wringing the campaign was approved and more than a few fingers were crossed as we launched.

Here's where luck favors the prepared – we sought very high profile programming to launch the new effort, where else but the Super Bowl? As it turns out, the NFL is somewhat picky about who runs ads during their broadcast and gambling was on the no-no list. Yet the spot was not about gambling – they didn't care. So we protested. And that protest was picked up in the news – in fact by dozens of national news outlets. With lead-in lines such as “The TV commercial the NFL doesn't want you to see...” most of the news programs showed the ad for us. In the end, we gained over \$6 million in earned media before spending our first paid media dollar. Touchdown!

Five Years Later

We are just entering our fifth year of the campaign and the results speak for themselves. The phrase “What Happens Here, Stays Here” has become embedded in the popular vernacular. We'd like to say we knew this campaign would take off like it did, but we were even surprised. The line has been used by Jay Leno, Billy Crystal when he hosted the Oscars, as the puzzle on “Wheel of Fortune”, and dozens of other television shows – even the First Lady quoted the line when on the Late Show. My personal favorite was the use of the line in news coverage on selecting a new Pope – “What happens in conclave, stays in conclave”.

Research shows that the campaign has played a significant role in making consumer perceptions about Las Vegas much more positive and our unaided awareness when asked about tourism slogans is regularly over 85%. In 2005, the campaign was credited with assisting Las Vegas in being named the #5 “hot brand” in America by an independent study conducted by Landor & Associates and it was predicted to go to #4 the following year. In fact, in 2006 Las Vegas reached #2 only behind Google.

Most importantly, Las Vegas has continued to flourish as one of the top tourism destinations in the world. The year before the launch we had just over 35 million visitors with an average occupancy rate of 84%; we ended 2006 with nearly 39 million

visitors and average occupancy of 89.7%.

Of course, none of this would have been possible if the destination didn't deliver on the brand promise. Our hotel partners invest in that promise to fulfill the expectations of visitors. Las Vegas is in a continuous state of evolution, constantly reinventing itself, creating ever-more possibilities of what can happen here.

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Key Insights

1. I don't know if there are any real secrets left in destination marketing. The success enjoyed by Las Vegas begins and ends with the customer. The account planning process we utilized was crucial because you aren't going to discover fundamental “truth” about consumer's passions and desires in focus groups alone. Would you share that with a room full of strangers? There's more to account planning than covered here and you'll find a decent description at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Account_Planning.
2. Make sure your brand accurately reflects what you have to sell. Find and tell the truth about the experience (not just the attractions and amenities) offered. Remember when some thought that Las Vegas was trying to target families and kids? That's a bit of a myth – yes, some of the hotel properties built attractions such as

theme parks to broaden their appeal. But the LVCVA never actually shifted its marketing effort towards families and children. The result was the product offering starting to deviate from the brand – people didn't “buy” Las Vegas as a family destination. In the years since, the product and brand are in sync.

3. Finally, don't be afraid to take a chance. Do the homework, hold your agency and/or marketing department accountable, let your customers into your planning process – and when it's done right, let the dice roll. You might just be surprised by how successful you can be.

Rob O'Keefe, Group Account Director, R&R Partners. As the leader of the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority (LVCVA) account, Rob manages an \$90 million budget, a staff of over 30 people and coordinates the combined efforts of domestic and global branding, public relations, research, media and digital marketing for the largest tourism account in the country. His ability to juggle the many demands of this dynamic tourism client, stay abreast of industry trends and assist his team in starting a few new ones has made him an invaluable asset to R&R Partners.

Though he helps oversee the wildly popular “What happens here, stays here” campaign, which was labeled by The New York Times as “a stroke of marketing genius,” Rob is never content to rest on the campaign's laurels. His philosophy is always to push the brand further than anyone imagined possible and has led to Las Vegas' being named the #2 brand in the country behind only Google, according to Landor & Associates' 2006 Newsmakers Survey.

Prior to joining R&R Partners, Rob worked for Caesars Entertainment, where he managed all marketing and promotional efforts for Bally's Hotel & Casino and Paris Las Vegas. He initiated the first ever branding campaign for Paris Las Vegas, which led to the highest summertime occupancy and average daily rates that the property had ever enjoyed. He also spearheaded an entertainment strategy that increased profits by creating a new channel of revenue and spiking ticket sales during a traditionally soft period for the property.

Rob is a sought-after speaker on the topics of brand development and strategically integrated communications. He has delivered addresses on “Maximizing Brand Power” at the Travel Industry Association's national conference; “Driving Promotional ROI” at the Promotions Marketing Association annual meeting; and “Building Brand Equity” for the New York Advertising Club. He earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree in mass communications from the University of Missouri and has completed graduate studies in marketing and finance at the Henry Block School of Business.