TouRiSm maRkETiNG: ThE BEST ThERE iS – a STudy of WEST viRGiNia

Stephanie L. Thorn
Marshall University
Huntington, WV 25755

Roy Ramthun, Ph.D.
Concord University

Abstract.—The purpose of this study is to understand and define the “best” marketing practices in the tourism industry for destination marketing organizations and to identify what convention and visitors bureaus in West Virginia are doing to meet these standards. Little research has been conducted on tourism marketing practices; therefore, a standardized list of practices was created using references from major marketing corporations, travel associations, accreditation programs, and universities worldwide. Then quantitative and qualitative research was conducted via telephone and the Internet to collect information from 24 convention and visitors bureaus belonging to the West Virginia Association of Convention and Visitors Bureaus and the West Virginia Division of Tourism. A comparison was made between West Virginia agency practices and the identified best marketing practices. The importance of tourism marketing and its impacts is also discussed.

1.0 INTRoduCTioN

As more communities in the United States have recognized the competitive nature of tourism markets, the number of local destination marketing organizations (DMOs) has increased steadily. These organizations often focus on small-scale tourism destinations such as small cities or rural counties. While the growing prevalence of locally based tourism marketing organizations may provide some competitive benefits for small communities, there is growing concern about the quality of the services offered by these organizations. If tourism marketing agencies are not well run, they may provide poor information to visitors or waste the money spent for advertising by small tourism companies.

This study addressed the question: “How do the practices of West Virginia convention and visitors bureaus (CVBs) compare to the best standard tourism marketing practices in the world?” Little research has been done on the subject. There is currently no other standardized list of best marketing practices for tourism. Accreditation programs are available to convention and visitors bureaus through travel associations and marketing corporations, but the lists of necessary marketing items they provide are very generic (Destination Marketing Association International 2005, 2008). Case studies of tourism marketing practices and their effectiveness in Las Vegas, NV; Orlando, FL; and Williamsburg, VA, have been conducted by Kotler Marketing Group (Kotler and Monroe 1999); no such studies exist for West Virginia.

2.0 METHODS

Research was conducted first by assessing worldwide tourism marketing practices and then creating a self-defined, standardized “best practices” list. In March and April 2007, convenience sampling was used to administer surveys to the 24 members of the West Virginia Association of Convention and Visitors Bureaus and one additional CVB that belonged to the West Virginia Division of Tourism. These agencies are geographically distributed across the state of West Virginia (Fig. 1). Surveys were completed via telephone interviews, email, and web analysis and consisted of 22 questions with open-ended, Likert Scale, and nominal questions. Each interview took approximately 15 to 20 minutes. Answers to Likert Scale and nominal questions were assigned point values to use when contrasting the different convention and visitors bureaus. Results were then assessed through comparative analysis and composite scores.
Figure 1.—Map of West Virginia CVB locations.

West Virginia Convention and Visitors Bureaus
- Beckley: Southern West Virginia CVB
- Bluefield: Mercer County CVB
- Bridgeport: Greater Bridgeport CVB
- Chapmanville: Coalfield CVB
- Charleston: Charleston CVB
- Davis: Tucker County CVB
- Elkins: Randolph County & Mountain Highlands CVBs
- Fairmont: Marion County CVB
- Harpers Ferry: Jefferson County CVB
- Huntington: Cabell Huntington CVB
- Hurricane: Hurricane & Putnam County CVBs
- Lewisburg: Greenbrier County CVB
- Martins: Pocahontas County CVB
- Martinsburg: Martinsburg-Berkeley County CVB
- Morgantown: Greater Morgantown CVB
- New Cumberland: Top of West Virginia CVB
- Oak Hill: New River CVB
- Parkersburg: Greater Parkersburg CVB
- South Charleston: South Charleston CVB
- Summersville: Summersville CVB
- Weston: Lewis County CVB
- Wheeling: Wheeling CVB
Through the surveys, information was gathered about slogans, target markets, visitor brochures, visitor websites, and marketing for both peak season and the off season. Elements of each agency’s marketing plan were studied, including updates, vision statements, and the actual wording of the plan. Employee incentives, performance reports, and visitor profiling practices were also examined and advertising claims were assessed for potential falseness. Last, educational programs, community collaboration, and tourism-related activities were considered. People interviewed were usually executive directors, marketing directors, or directors of sales and the length of time at their present positions ranged from 5.5 months to 25 years. Some examples of target market segments mentioned include families, gamblers, skiers, children, shoppers, outdoor recreationists, senior citizens, and history buffs.

Two key phrases used in this research need to be defined:

**Destination Marketing Organization (DMO):** a company or other entity involved in the business of increasing tourism to a destination or improving its public image

**Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB):** a type of DMO that is a nonprofit organization charged with representing a specific destination and helping the long-term development of communities through travel and tourism strategies. It is usually a membership organization that brings together businesses that rely on tourism and meetings for revenue. It is usually is a one-stop shop for local tourism interests providing a full range of unbiased information and offering most services free to the public.

### 3.0 RESULTS

#### 3.1 List of 18 standard best tourism marketing practices

- Have key market segments with different goals and strategies for each segment.
- Have a website that markets specifically to their target market segments. The website should be routinely updated and maintained.
- Offer a comprehensive visitors guide and/or brochure and update it at least once per year.
- Keep performance reports on promotion and advertising done via direct mail or the Internet.
- Have a powerful slogan to position themselves well in the eyes of the consumer.
- Have their brand on any products or materials relative to their location.
- Collect data on visitor profiles to be able to meet consumers’ preferences and buying behaviors.
- Provide educational programs for members, local residents, businesses, and others to reinforce the image of the destination and to help keep the marketing brand consistent.
- Market to travelers for activities and events both in the peak season and the off season.
- Ensure consistency between tourism demographics and the tourists’ needs and wants.
- Strive for innovative and creative marketing campaigns and offer incentive rewards to do so.
- Include a vision statement for the future in their marketing plan and update the plan annually.
- Cooperate and collaborate in marketing plans with everyone involved or potentially involved in tourism in the community.
- Maintain an inventory of attractions, events, restaurants, resorts, and the like in the service area, including those that are not members.
- Routinely survey members to assess the effects of the DMO’s marketing efforts.
- Continuously participate in travel associations and tourism-related events such as conferences and travel shows.
- Routinely check to see whether there is consistency between what members actually offer and what they are advertising through the DMO.
- Have all employees of the organization read through the marketing plan every time it is updated to ensure that all employees are aware of new marketing efforts.
3.2 Results of the Survey of West Virginia CVBs

The following statistics compare information gathered in interviews with CVB personnel to the standardized list above of “best” marketing practices.

Eighteen of the 25 respondents said that their CVBs have a slogan and 13 of those also have their brand on all related materials. Ninety-two percent of the CVBs reported having more than one target market segment. Of those 23 CVBs with more than one target market, 10 (43 percent) have different marketing goals and strategies for each target market, but 13 (57 percent) do not (i.e., they market the same way to all travelers). Almost all of the CVBs (92 percent) offer a comprehensive visitors guide or brochure and half of them update it at least once per year. All but one of the CVBs market to tourists for both the peak season and the off season.

The CVB websites are updated with the following frequencies: 28 percent daily; 32 percent weekly; 4 percent bi-weekly; 16 percent monthly; and 20 percent every 6 months or more (Fig. 2). Twenty of the 25 CVBs (80 percent) have a vision statement for the future in their marketing plan. Eighty percent of the CVBs update their marketing plan annually and 60 percent make all of their employees read over the plan each time it is updated. Thirteen CVBs (52 percent) never or rarely offer incentives for employees to come up with new marketing campaigns while six CVBs (24 percent) usually do and six always do (Fig. 3). Seventy-six percent of the CVBs (19 of 25) maintain performance reports on promotion and advertising and 72 percent (18 of 25) collect data on visitor profiles. Eighty percent of the CVBs study tourists’ wants and needs while 84 percent (21 of 25) maintain an inventory of the service area’s amenities.

Of those DMOs that have paying members, only half survey their members about their opinions of the tourism bureau’s marketing efforts. Moreover, false advertising is possible because only 45 percent of the CVBs have someone who checks to see whether member advertisements are consistent with actual offerings. Forty percent of the CVBs never or rarely provide educational programs to the public, private, and nonprofit sectors of the market to reinforce the

---

**The CVB Website is Updated How Often?**

- **Daily**: 28%
- **Weekly**: 32%
- **Bi-Weekly**: 16%
- **Monthly**: 4%
- **Every 6 months or more**: 20%

*Figure 2.—Frequency of CVBs updating of their websites.*
image of the destination while 56 percent of the CVBs sometimes do. Forty percent of the CVBs rarely work with the community while engaging in marketing efforts, but 60 percent usually do.

Sixteen percent of the CVBs in the survey “sometimes” belong to associations and participate in tourism-related events while 44 percent “often” do and 40 percent “always” do. CVBs were mostly frequently associated or involved with the following professional organizations: the American Bus Association, the West Virginia Hospitality and Travel Association, Destination Marketing Association International, Travel Industry of America, and the Travel and Tourism Research Association.

4.0 DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

West Virginia DMOs are already doing many of the things on the best marketing strategies list – marketing for all four seasons, creating future-oriented marketing plans and updating them annually, maintaining an inventory of area attractions, compiling performance reports on promotion and advertising efforts, and attending tourism-related events and participating in travel associations – but there is also room for improvement.

A few CVBs are marketing to everyone and have no set target market segments, a practice that defeats the purpose of target marketing. For example, does West Virginia really want to attract young adults looking for nightclubs and a party scene? This would be a poor strategy because West Virginia has few opportunities for this type of activity. Second, most CVBs are failing to use different strategies to reach different types of tourists; for example, visitors traveling to see Civil War sites are going to respond to different messages than are tourists in search of gaming opportunities. Third, websites need to be updated much more frequently to provide timely and accurate information to the wide market of potential tourists than can be reached on the Internet. Fourth, slogans are a staple of marketing strategy, but must be used frequently and consistently on all pertinent marketing materials in order to be effective.

How Often Do CVB’s Offer Incentives for Employees to Come Up with New Marketing Campaigns?

- Never or Rarely: 52%
- Sometimes: 24%
- Almost Always or Always: 24%

Figure 3.—Frequency of CVBs offering incentives to employees to suggest marketing campaigns.
Visitor guides and brochures should be updated at least once per year and many CVBs are failing to do so; if nothing else, prices always change. In addition, CVBs need to begin checking for possible false advertising by looking at what members are offering and making sure that published information is correct and accurate. It is extremely helpful for CVB employees to read through each updated marketing plan so that they are familiar with new campaigns and understand how to sell the destination appropriately. Offering incentives for employees to think creatively about marketing may help foster innovative strategies. Collecting information on visitor demographics and surveying CVB members are two ways to gather information and feedback to improve marketing strategies. Finally, community collaboration and educational programs are key measures because local people are more likely to support tourism initiatives and strategies if they have a say in creating them.

The survey/interview portion of this research relied on the self-reporting of CVB employees about their organization, and survey responses varied considerably across the CVBs in the study. This variability could have been resulted from variation in each organization’s size (number of employees), experience level (age of the organization and employees’ years of experience), funding (affecting the number and type of marketing initiatives), scope (whether the CVB was marketing for the entire county or just one city), and the experience and length of employment of the person interviewed.

5.0 CITATIONS

