

**INTERNET & BRANDING: A PERFECT MATCH
OR A FATAL ATTRACTION?
ANALYSIS OF FIFTY STATES OF THE U.S.
OFFICIAL TOURISM WEBSITES**

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Abstract: Internet plays a significant role in generating new business and facilitating customers' need for a better way to plan and book their trips. From a marketers' perspective, one of the seemingly "fatal attractions" of the Internet for DMOs is that it can be an extremely effective tool in terms of both cost effectiveness and market penetration compared with other traditional forms for destination branding. Employing a content analysis of the slogan, graphic projection, verbal expression, and other explicit or implied messages at the official tourism website of each state, the study attempts to delineate unique selling propositions (USP) and positioning strategies of destination organizations at the state level. Also, the state's tourism slogans were analyzed and categorized into types for an evaluation of their efficiency in terms of USP and targeting. Five types of slogans emerged as the result of content

analysis: 1) Buy us because we are good; 2) Attribute based but not unique; 3) Focused on unique product attributes; 4) unique appeal; and 5) no possible categories. As for the USP, almost all states emphasized nature and culture/heritage as USP. However, many of the states' official websites do not maximize their utility as a marketing tool due to a lack of consistency among the elements.

Introduction

Electronic commerce has far reaching impact on the way travel is marketed, distributed, sold and delivered (Williams & Palmer, 1999; Pollack, 1995). The importance of the U.S. State official travel website has been recognized not only as a key promotional vehicle but also as a major distribution channel for domestic and international tourism with 167 million Americans (Nielsen/Netratings, 2001) with Internet access and 400 million worldwide (Computer Industry Almanac, 2001). In the most recent survey of Internet usage by Nielsen/Netratings (Dan Creekmore, personal communication, April 27, 2001) conducted during March 2001, 34.8 million Americans visited a tourism/travel related website. This represents 39.9% of the active Internet market. During each visit they stayed for an average of 10.5 minutes. In 2000, Americans made purchases of travel and travel related goods and service over the Internet worth more than \$13 billion (Patkose, Stueve, & Cook, 2001). The Travel Industry Association (2001) estimates that at least 90 million Americans over the age of 18 with Internet access are part of the travel market; of those, more than 59 million people have used the Internet to make plans for travel (Figures 1 & 2). The Internet has put consumers in control of their plans.

One of the "fatal attractions" of the Internet for DMOs is that it can be an extremely effective tool in terms of both cost effectiveness and market penetration, compared with other traditional forms such as pamphlet, print, and media materials, for destination branding. Benckendorff and Black (2000) studied the Regional Tourism Authorities of Australia who had a WWW site and found that the Internet

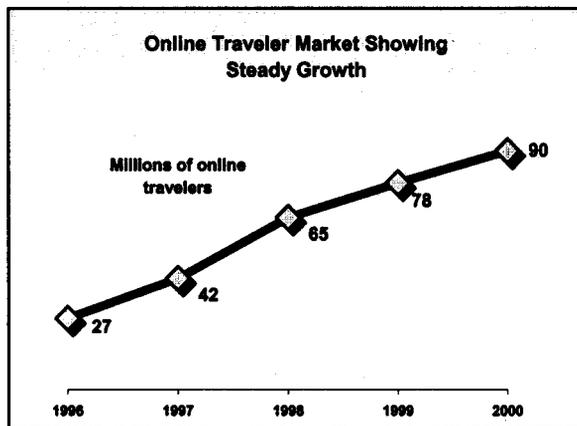


Figure 1. Online Travel Market Growth

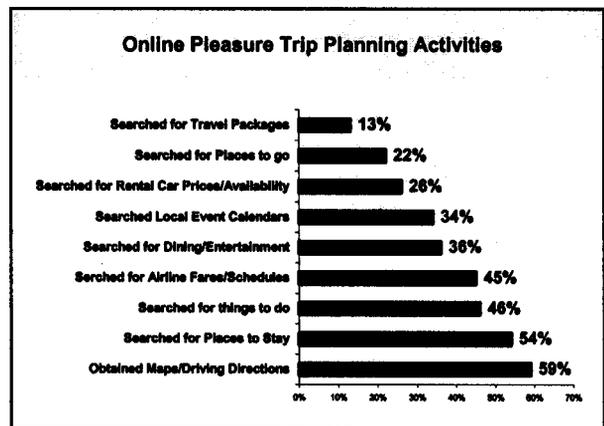


Figure 2. Online Pleasure Trip Planning Activities

Source: Travel Industry Association of America [TIA]. (2001, March). Newsline.

was most useful for tasks such as building visitor awareness, providing customer service, and public relations and education. Although it is a recent phenomenon, Internet marketing for tourism destinations, destination branding, and as a core positioning strategy, has become a key issue for both private industry and public tourism organizations alike. In destination branding, image plays a pivotal role. The purpose of this paper is to analyze 50 U.S. state tourism organizations' official websites, assessing their brand and image strategy in terms of the slogan and graphic messages. Based on the image projection and brand creation of each state in vehicle of slogan, graphic projection, and verbal expression, the unique selling points (propositions) and positioning issues are addressed.

Specifically the objectives of the study were to: 1) analyze the graphic/verbal images of each state website and interpret in terms of branding & targeting; 2) analyze the state's tourism slogan and categorize them into types; and evaluate their efficiency in terms of USP and targeting.

Literature Review

Branding Tourism Destinations

Branding has long been popular in consumer goods marketing. Even though branding management has been introduced in tourism research rather recently, in the hospitality and tourism marketing arena, it is recognized as a powerful force. However, branding a tourism destination is relatively new development (Gnoth, 1998). A brand is a name, term, sign, symbol, design or a combination of these elements that is intended to identify the goods or services of a seller and differentiate them from competitors to influence the behavior of the consumer (Kotler, 1999; Crawford-Welch, 1998). Branding as marketing strategy is to create and manage these components of a brand, which is key to winning the battle of "market positioning." Branding strategy is developed for "encouraging awareness and establishing perceptions of quality and favorable associations" (Henderson, 2000, p. 37). When market competition gets fierce in today's tourism marketplace, branding becomes the most effective and powerful strategy for market positioning, making the product stand out in the minds of existing and prospective customers relative to its competition in terms of benefits and promises (Crawford-Welch, 1998). Given that the definition of destination brand image is the set of beliefs potential tourists hold about a particular destination, it is well established that tourist destinations with a positive and clear image create stronger market positioning over those without it.

Image as a Pivot in Destination Positioning

In destination market positioning, destination image plays a pivotal role. Brand image is a key component in the formation of a clear and recognizable brand identity in the market (Williams et al., 1999). Due to the interrelationship between destination choice behavior and destination image, there is an increased interest in destination image as a predictor variable in the destination choice model. Diverse literature on travel behavior research has supported the proposition that destination image plays a significant role in a traveler's destination choice (Hunt, 1975; Woodside &

Lysonski, 1989; Crompton, 1977; Pearce, 1982; Tourism Canada, 1986-1989; Gartner, 1989; Martin & Eroglu, 1993; Milman & Pizam, 1995). As Bojanic (1991) posits, tourist preferences for destinations largely depend on the positive perception future visitors possess of the destination. Court and Lupton (1997) also illustrate that destination image determines the segment membership among three categories of tourism consumers, adapters, inactives, and rejectors. As earlier researchers such as Mayo (1973) and Hunt (1974) posited, destination image is a critical factor in a traveler's destination choice.

State Tourism Slogan

A slogan is used to deliver a message about unique selling propositions (USP) of a product to the market. It has long been widely used in various products as part of advertising campaigns. Slogans are believed to play a crucial role in advertising (Richardson & Cohen, 1993). Moriarity (1991) posited that slogans are "battle cries" of advertising campaigns. He emphasized that slogans must reflect the character or personality of the product to play this role of "battle cries" successfully. The product personality and character can be summarized in "image." Ultimately, a good state tourism slogan should express the USP of the destination brand pleasantly and effectively to the eyes and mind of the audience.

A review of all American states' official tourism website leads to intriguing results in the entities involved. Each state tries to present a slogan to represent its destination image and key selling points in order to increase the awareness of brand and stimulate interest from their potential visitors.

Methodology

The current study is based on a content analysis of the fifty U.S. states' official tourism websites. The official websites of the individual states were located through the official website of each state and from <http://www.july15.com/julia/statetravel.htm>. Each tourism website differs from each other in terms of its contents and format. Therefore, the authors tried to analyze common elements, limiting to the first three tiers of each site. Content analysis as an "observational research method is used to systematically evaluate the symbolic content of all forms of recorded communications" (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991, p. 243). It is believe to offer several benefits in consumer research including unobstrusiveness, a possibility to assess environmental variables and to provide an empirical starting point (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991), and it also has potential as a companion research method in multimethod studies (Brewer & Hunter, 1989).

Results

The Slogan, Image, and Branding & Positioning

The official websites of each of the U.S. states are analyzed in terms of slogan and graphic and verbal image projection for an analysis of its selling points and target market (Table 1).

Table 1. Analysis of Official Tourism Websites of Fifty States in the U.S.

Name of States	Slogan	Graphic/ Verbal Image	Selling Points -> Branding	Target Market -> Positioning
<i>Group 1: "Buy us because we are good"</i>				
Iowa	"Come be our guest"	Limited graphics	Culturally rich cities Authentic American farms Many things to do and see	Midwest vacationers
Kansas	"Simply Wonderful" theme "Heart of American West"	Sunflowers	Friendly Midwest hospitality Sunflower state Special interest travel opportunity Wild beauty Sports	Vacation destination - traveling alone/family/ group tours/special interest traveling
Nebraska	"Genuine Nebraska"	Peaceful graphic image Native American dancer	Wildlife Birds' native habitat Tranquility of environment *Separate Wildlife site	Crowdedness avoiders Birdwatcher Urban escapers
Tennessee	"Sounds good to me"	Riverboat passing through river Aquarium with children around "Listen its Tennessee"	Authentic mountain music Sunrise above the mountain Individualized itinerary/ tailored trip schedule	Not specified
Georgia	"Georgia on my mind"	Limited graphics	Not specified *International assistance-exchange rate	Not specified
Alabama	"Unforgettable"	Black jazz musician playing music	Provided in separated links	Not clear
California	"Find yourself here"	Limited graphics	Very descriptive website-decentralized by region or cities	*Regional focus
Massachusetts	"Massachusetts, take a real vacation"	Affective wordings such as feel, under the star, swing music, candle light, swan	To see & do Travel experience such as local cousin	Not specified (the web was very sophisticated urban image with elaborated wordings)
Connecticut	"We are full of surprise"	Rowing boat picture	Poor website	NA
North Carolina	"A better place to be"	Wallpaper type of beach image	Heritage Natural beauty	Weekend market
Indiana	"Enjoy Indiana"	Limited graphics	History Hoosier people	Getaway weekenders
Illinois	"Right Here Right Now"	Limited graphics	State of Lincoln African American heritage Hispanic culture Diverse theme trips Budget travel	Getaway trip
Ohio	"A Perfect Getaway"	Fall colors	Wide spectrum of activities Buckeye state	Family getaways
Wyoming	"Like no place on earth"	Natural scenes	Natural scenery Friendly people Heritage & value Great nature	Urban dwellers
<i>Group 2: Attribute based but not unique</i>				
Missouri	Missouri, "Where the river runs"	City image	State of diversity Proud heritage Music & musicians Cities	Family holiday Fun & adventure seekers
Arkansas	"The natural state"	Limited graphics	Feel free to do everything Catch your breath Family fun Outdoor activities Natural beauty Star gazing	Family Outdoor escape *Seniors' site
Vermont	"Vermont is plain beautiful"	Green mountain Farm files Villages Lakes, ponds	Small scales Intimacy Peaceful scenery	Family travelers/ package tourists, searching for diverse themes

Table 1. Analysis of Official Tourism Websites of Fifty States in the U.S. (Cont.)

Name of States	Slogan	Graphic/ Verbal Image	Selling Points -> Branding	Target Market -> Positioning
<i>Group 2: Attribute based but not unique (cont.)</i>				
Oklahoma	"Parks, Resorts & Golf"	A young camping couple Natural parks	Strong outdoor recreation focus State Parks Golf World class equestrian trail State park Package special (*CEO Membership program)	Outdoor recreationists State Park visitors Golfers
Mississippi	"The south's warmest welcome"	Sunset in a mountain Nature	Golf Casino Highway 61 tour Delta blues Beaches Heritage African American heritage *International site and domestic group tour sites provided	Domestic group tourists International tourists
Texas	"It's like a whole other country"	Rodeo Cowboys Wild West graphic image	"Wild west Texas adventure" Cultural diversity-"Texas melting pot" Sea, sands, & sights	Tourists seeking 3-5 day vacations and getaway/ package tourists
New Mexico	"Put yourself in a state of enchantment"	A train passing cross mountain	Beauty of ancient cultures Rich landscape Nature with deep contrast, i.e., mountain & dessert, lake, forest	Not clear
Washington	"A little trip to the extraordinary"	Limited graphic image	Not specifically presented	No distinctive message at all
*Nevada	"Home of adventure & entertainment"	Night life-bright lights Natural scenes	Entertainment/Night life Casino Hotels Nature Outdoor recreation-ski, fishing Silver state Sports events Bypass Wedding-official tourism offices provide marriage information for the visitors & tourists * Korean/Japanese websites – detailed information in Korean and Japanese languages, also very detailed guidelines against crime and theft	Korean & Japanese tourists- try to attract these markets also to nature and outdoor, sports event in conjunction with casino and city tour Domestic city tourists for entertainment (casino) and nature-based tour
N. Dakota	"Discover the spirit" "Begin the adventure"	American Indians & frontiers faces	Salient message: visit a land where history never gets old "Place of American democracy" "The Faces" festival	History/culture oriented tourists
Maine	"The Maine attraction"	A light house	Marine resources Seafood Natural treasure Summer youth camp Outdoor recreation Culture	Clear target on summer vacationers/youth campers
Pennsylvania	"Pocket edition of World"	17C Sail boat Verbal image projection - "relaxed," "unique" and "authentic"	Hunting/fishing Wildlife observing Unspoiled natural beauty Beer festival 100% pure Pennsylvania	Nature lovers and culture oriented travelers
Delaware	"The first state"	Limited graphic image	Easy access to the one third of the nation's population Culture/history Tax free shopping (top 10 shopping place in the U.S.)- Value for money	Geographic target-NY, Washington D.C. Family pleasure vacationers Overnight stoppers Getaway weekenders Short stay

Table 1. Analysis of Official Tourism Websites of Fifty States in the U.S. (Cont.)

Name of States	Slogan	Graphic/ Verbal Image	Selling Points -> Branding	Target Market -> Positioning
<i>Group 2: Attribute based but not unique (cont.)</i>				
W. Virginia	"Wild and Wonderful"	Limited graphic image	Web is being improved	NA
New Hampshire	"The road less traveled"	Picture of children	Tax free shopping Theme parks	Kids and families/people traveling with children
*South Carolina	"Smiling face, beautiful places"	A couple on the beach	Adventure Climate Theme parks Golf Beach Nature based activities Value & variety	Domestic market *Strong international focus: German and Japanese sites
<i>Group 3: Focused on Unique product attributes</i>				
Minnesota	"Explore Minnesota-Take home a story"	Lakes & mountain	Giant ridge golf Long trails Outdoor activities Scenic bypass	Family tourists Fun and education seekers Fall-breakers
Arizona	"Grand Canyon state"	Highway crossing desert Canyon	Outdoor recreation Nature wonders Old west attractions Desert adventures-attractions/cacti gardens	Hikers Desert adventure seekers Travelers Outdoor recreationists
Kentucky	"Heart of America"	NA	Getaway- mini vacation, long weekend	Not clear
Michigan	"Great Lakes Great Times"	Harbor light	Summer golf capital Snowmobiling/skiing Culture	Personalized vacation with variety experience
Colorado	"Totally Winteractive"	Mountains Skiers	Snow ski Ecotourism sites	Not clear
Montana	"Big sky country"	Natural scenes	Ski (Rocky ski area) Wildlife watch Cousin: Big-sky-way Cooking recipes Ghost town tour Crystal lake/canoeing Mountain bicycling	Outdoor recreationist Wildlife watchers Sight-seeing tourists
S. Dakota (Provided better cite than N. Dakota)	"Great faces, great places"	Great faces and mountains	History Great faces American Indian culture-history Adventure history	Family vacationers Fun seekers Getaway Active outdoor vacationers: "Vacation, it is not virtual, it is reality"
Utah	No official state slogan, a catchphrase instead: "The great snow on earth"	Limited graphic image except Olympic promotions	Ski Rafting Winter Olympic 2002: Salt lake 2002- Emblem "Contrast-Culture-Courage"	Winter Olympic attendees
<i>Group 4: Unique appeal</i>				
Hawaii	"Visiting the Aloha state", "The island of Aloha"	Tropical colors Pictures of Hawaiian women	Adventure in paradise Action Adventure opportunities World-class event Shopping * Decentralized webs	Family vacationers Honeymooners
New York	"I Love NY"	"Nobody beats New York state!" Ski Family Youth Horseback riding pictures	Hudson river-America's identity Rich heritage & diversity History Romance Outdoor activities Road trip Family gathering NYC weekends Waterways	Domestic tourists from all around the U.S. International travelers

Table 1. Analysis of Official Tourism Websites of Fifty States in the U.S. (Cont.)

Name of States	Slogan	Graphic/ Verbal Image	Selling Points -> Branding	Target Market -> Positioning
<i>Group 4: Unique appeal (cont.)</i>				
*Wisconsin	"Stay just a little bit longer"	Pictures of little children Mountains Lots of beautiful nature pictures	Memory Beauty of nature Wonderful people & wonderful nature Scenic beauty	Family for nature-based vacations Families with young children Nature-based tourism
Virginia	"Virginia is for Lovers"	History Beaches Mountain graphic image	Beaches Mountains Mountain trails History-first English settler	Outdoor recreationists Vacationers *International tourists-very detailed, well organized international sites in several languages
<i>Group 5: No possible categories</i>				
Idaho	"Come fine Idaho" - Come find Idaho and come back to life	Waterfalls Resort	Waterfalls Resorts Ski Ranch Scenic byways	Not specified
Florida	"FLA USA, Visit Florida"	Palm trees on the beaches	Hospitality Kids fun (Disney) Sophisticated big city tour Nature Cultural attractions Beaches/sugar white sands	For all or Not clear
New Jersey	"New Jersey and you, perfect together"	Limited graphic image	Family vacation Getaway Something for everyone	Getaway weekenders Family vacationers
Rhode Island	"Ocean Current"	Traditional English mansion English men in costume	Tradition English culture Culture rather than Nature	Cultural interested
<i>Currently No slogan</i>				
Oregon	NA	Mt. Hood	Japanese website	*Japanesc travelers
Alaska	NA	Limited graphic image	Decentralized & descriptive	NA
The list is ordered in geographical regions, i. e., Mid-west, South Regions, Western Regions, and Eastern. The analysis was based on the information available as of November 2000. * indicates particularly good or unique features				

The Slogans for USP

The slogans of the U.S. states tourism department seem to fall into one of five types: The first group takes a "buy us because we are good" approach, such as "Come be our guest" (IO), "Simply Wonderful" (KA), and "Genuine Nebraska" (NE), for example. These slogans did not identify what brand image and USPs they try to make. More of these types are: "Sounds good to me" (TE), "Unforgettable" (AL), Idaho's "Come find Idaho", "Find yourself here" (CA), "Take a real vacation" (MA), and "A better place to be" of (NC). The second type tries to present the personality of their brand based on product attributes that are not unique. For example, "Missouri, where the river runs", tries to emphasize its beautiful rivers, but others have beautiful rivers as well. Others like this include Arkansas, "The natural state", Texas, "It's like a whole other country", "The road less traveled" (NH), "Smiling face, beautiful place", South Carolina. These slogans try to make USP but fail to differentiate themselves from others.

The third group focuses on unique product attributes, such as "The Faces"(SD), "Grand Canyon"(AZ), "Great Lakes" (MI), "Totally winteractive" (CO), and Montana's "Big sky country". The fourth category of slogans is different from three categories described above. They are "I love NY" (NY, since 1977), which successfully evokes emotional attachment to the state; Hawaii, which uniquely creates a foreign tropical atmosphere with "The island of Aloha" (Aloha means hello); Wisconsin, "Just stay a little longer"; and "Virginia is for lovers" (VA) are persuasive and deliver a clear message. Finally, there are some slogans characterized by ambiguity of meaning or mismatch with their image such as "The first state" (DE, first of what?), Rhode Island's "Ocean current" (Is it a slogan? If so, what does it say about itself?).

The majority of state slogans seem to fall in the first three categories. As for the USP, almost all states emphasized nature and culture/heritage as USP, only to make it common and usual.

Conclusions

There seems to be ample opportunity to improve states' websites with respect to brand image, personality and creating slogans that better focus on the unique selling points of each state tourism products. Five types of slogans emerged as the result of content analysis (Table 1). However, many of the states' official websites do not maximize their utility as a marketing tool due to a lack of consistency among the elements. In other words, the slogan and graphic/verbal image are not consistent, the target market is ambiguous, and they fail to clearly deliver the USP. The shot-gun approach ("We offer you all you want") was rampant. On the other hand, the majority of state slogans seem to fall in the first three categories: (1) Buy us because we are good; (2) Attribute based but not unique; and (3) Focused on Unique product attributes. As for the USP, almost all states emphasized nature and culture/heritage as USP, making it common and usual. One challenge, however, that the state marketing managers may confront seems to be heterogeneity of their tourism products in terms of geographical, cultural, and natural resource diversity within a state. This is well evidenced in large tourism host states such as Hawaii, Florida, New York, California and Illinois (national top spenders of tourism budget for websites). Their state tourism organizations seem to decentralize their organizations. The decentralization tendency is well reflected in their official websites, which hardly project a uniquely concentrated personality for their brand. Empirical research example on the topic discussed and analyzed in the current paper is limited and still in its infancy. Therefore, the topic warrants more empirical research both by industry practitioners and academia.

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