

Marketing The Authentic Experience

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An Evolving Market

Tourism is rapidly changing. In the landscape of advancing technology, expanding globalization, and a shift in generational attitudes, tourism is seeing an evolution of market desires. Gradually the age of familiar travel itineraries is fading, making way for a new generation filled with wanderlust and hungry for adventure. As the world continues to connect through the internet and social media, destination tourism marketing professionals have an exciting amount of work ahead of them. So long as professionals properly evaluate and remain ahead of trends for the coming years, the industry can continue to flourish. Over the next 20 years, destinations will see the rise of an experiential travel trend motivated by the interests of Millennial and Generation Z travelers. These increasingly globalized generations are more interested in unique travel experiences than generations before them.

Luckily for destination marketing professionals, not only do young travelers desire life-changing experiences, but they also want to share their transformative adventures with their followers on social media. The increase in social media popularity is advantageous for destinations. Tourists are looking for ways to connect with and positively contribute to the local community they are visiting. They are looking for opportunities to create a narrative of adventure to share with others through photos, videos, blogs, etc. In addition to sharing their experiences

through social media, tourists provide a source of marketing for destinations. But how do marketing professionals bring the tourists to the destination in the first place?

The biggest challenge for tourism marketers is determining how to strategically communicate their destination's unique authentic experience to tourists. DMOs have an exciting opportunity to work directly with their local community to ensure they are exhibiting their value for authenticity. With the transformation of market interests, it is now essential for destination marketing organizations to evaluate and anticipate the wants and needs of this young generation to market successfully.

The Rise of the Experiential Trend

The desire for unique adventure and dependence on social media has made way for the rise of experiential travel trend. While once considered the way of backpackers and gap year students, experiential travel is becoming increasingly more mainstream. Experiential travel is the key motivator for Gen Z and Millennial travelers with a wide range of options for travelers from pop-culture destinations, ecotourism, dark and deviant tourism, to heritage tourism. Experiential travel will be the overarching theme of tourism trends for the next 20 years.

One example of experiential travel to explore that encompasses the value of communicating authentic experiences is culinary tourism. As the public becomes increasingly exposed to the expansive cuisines of the globe through television and social media, there will be an increasing demand for top-notch food and beverage. Tourists do not merely want to see a new destination; they want to taste it. Food is the fingerprint of a location's heritage, agriculture, art,

traditions, and beyond. In the next 20 years, there will be a rise in trips entirely designed around culinary experiences.

Is the destination trying to sell mom and pop comfort food dripping with traditional recipes or serving up cutting edge fusion dishes? Perhaps it is a bit of both? That is the decision of the DMO. Food is no longer a means to fuel a tourist, but the potential fuel that may drive them to a particular location. Showcase what is unique about the destination and ensure that there is a tantalizing description to accompany a photo. Culinary tourism is an excellent example of where photo-based social media usage is going to play a vital role in marketing. Though the flavor is the most critical component of good food, visual appeal is the most crucial component for selling it. Instagram, Pinterest, and Facebook stand as the trifecta of visual marketing, with photography and videos at the helm.

Capitalization of Authenticity

How is this destination unique? Through marketing a destination as authentic, destinations can gain a competitive advantage. Marketing authenticity will continue to serve as a fundamental competitive advantage for destinations to capitalize on the experiential travel trend. Tourists are looking to do more than just wave to a destination from the comfort of a cruise ship; they are seeking human connection. They crave immersive experiences and are more interested in experiencing life as a local than as a tourist. Awareness of exploitation and commodification of local cultures in tourist destinations is growing, and tourists are becoming increasingly culturally sensitive and conscious. While exploitation remains an important ethical issue, the younger generation's awareness will make a significant impact on these issues rectification.

Tourism can be extremely beneficial in economically sustaining and revitalizing a community. Tourists appreciate knowing they have a hand in supporting the well-being of the local people. Marketing professionals should understand the importance of working directly with local communities and utilize their knowledge of the location to present the destination authentically.

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Communicating Effectively

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a well-structured Instagram post is worth a thousand visitors. Visual marketing is everything for expanding a destination's brand and presence. Now is the time to build destinations as a brand, with explicit values and ethics associated with sustaining the destination's culture and heritage and showcasing the destination's dedication to providing authentic experiences. Social Media such as Instagram, Youtube, and Twitter can be a stage to tell the story of a destination, and the way of life found there. DMO's can use these to their advantage, both to contribute to their community and to maintain lucrative tourist numbers. Marketing professionals now have the task of utilizing digital platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube to sell distinctly non-digital experiences. Become comfortable with the brand your location wants to showcase, involve the resources and local community, and

take advantage of social media. Embrace technology. Create an aesthetically pleasing social media presence, develop a significant presence and voice that reaches the critical audiences. We are now working with a generation that has a smaller attention span, and a broader desire to connect with others around the world. The trends discussed are a result of globalization and driven by digital media, as well as a willingness to detox from technology and experience something "real."

A Bright Future

The tourism market is changing yes, but at its core, tourism has always been about the joy of experiencing new things. "If you're twenty-two, physically fit, hungry to learn and be better, I urge you to travel – as far and as widely as possible....Find out how other people live and eat and cook. Learn from them — wherever you go" (Bourdain, 2011). Young tourists are on a quest for just that, to experience and taste as far and as wide as possible. It is the responsibility of destination marketing professionals to examine the desires of the new generation of tourists, to showcase and uphold a brand on social media platforms, and to continue to develop a sustainable marketing framework that will remain flexible to the evolving market. Embrace the technological tools at the disposal of professionals. Take pride in the destination and community represented on social media, and the authenticity of the destination will shine through to future visitors. With so many tools to explore, there is indeed a bright future for tourism marketing.

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