GETTING READY FOR MEGATRENDS IN TRAVEL ATTRACTIONS

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Based upon my study of tourism for a good many years, I place attractions at the forefront of the entire tourism system. Without interesting and worthwhile attractions, there would be little reason for travel. It is a priviledge for me to have this opportunity to meet with you, the experts in this field, and to voice some of my observations on trends in travel attractions. While those of us in education do not have your depth of experience in individual attractions, we do have the freedom to observe, study and research the field in an overall perspective.

And so, for the next few minutes, I would like to share with you some of my thoughts as I look to the future, which, by the way, I see as very bright--but very tough. I would like to offer for your consideration just eight statements about attractions that may provoke your thinking a bit. I have framed all of these as fallacies and half-truths.

1. Because of the information explosion, attractions are better understood (Fallacy).

If you believe this statement, you have much more faith in modern communications media than I have. I subscribe completely to Naisbitt's thesis that in this country we have shifted our economy from major industry to information generation and distribution. The facility with which information can be spread into millions of homes has grown exponentially. And the display racks of visitor information centers and travel agencies are filled to overflowing with brochures and leaflets about attractions.

But, do travelers really know any more about attractions than they did before? Are visitors understanding more about what they are seeing and doing? Or, has the magnum leap in volume of information material merely increased confusion? Survey after survey still reveals that people learn most about attractions from friends and relatives.

This observation suggests several conclusions:

One, we need to gain some new understandings with the news media. I am not talking censorship; I am talking professionalism. The news media, because of technology, have become elevated to a very powerful position of influence. I am not sure we fully understand the implications of this. Jody Powell, former press secretary for President Carter, has expressed concern over the fact that the exciting and sensational are not always balanced by accuracy and fairness. In a study we did two years ago on the impact on Texas coastal tourism of a major oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, we found that the exaggerated news stories did more to depress tourism than did the oil on the beaches.

Two, we need greater understanding of the difference between information and promotion. As we put more and more dollars into getting people's attention and luring them to our attractions, we tend to do relatively less and less to inform them about the attractions. Our descriptive literature about attractions is very sparse and, in my judgment, very poor. Every time I travel, I am amazed at how little true information is in my hotel concerning the surrounding attractions, either in literature or from employees. Flashy advertising--yes. But, information that helps me find and understand the attractions--no.

A third conclusion is that of graphics. Our photographic technology and color reproduction have now advanced so tremendously that almost anything is possible in pictures. But, as one travel photographer stated recently, "the bulk of travel photography today is color-coated, hyperbolic celluloid which tells us nothing new." She is very critical of the fact that we have unprecedented facility to record images of places but few travel photojournalists who do much to interpret the sense of place. She states further that "the traveling public is more visually sophisticated than the travel industry thinks it is."

A fourth conclusion is that the information explosion about attractions has not yet fully reached some service businesses, especially the airlines and the hotels. They still believe they are selling seats and rooms. This half-truth omits the other half--the fact that they are really selling a service to people on their way to an attraction, either for business or personal purposes.

And so, I see a challenge here for converting quantity of information into quality of information of real value to travelers.

2. Attractions are man-made (Half-truth)

In the sense that attractions are created productions--places and events that are staged--there is much truth in the statement that attractions are man-made. Certainly, those of you in commercial tourism attractions represent man-made development.

But, if we take the statement too literally, we ignore the very great dependency that many attractions have upon natural resources. For example, we know that some 85% of outdoor recreation, a big motivator for travel, takes place on dominantly natural resource areas. No matter how much we embrace man-made technology and ingenuity, we cannot deny the power of the several natural resource assets, particularly in this country where they are so abundant.

Our seacoasts, lakes, rivers and streams are an essential ingredient in a very high percentage of all tourism attractions. Our forests provide habitat for wildlife and esthetic foundations for scenery, especially dramatic in the fall of the year. Topographic change offers scenic variety, mountains to climb, and slopes to ski. And, even though we have ameliorated the influence of climate and weather through better heating and air conditioning, there are many influences of climate that we can't change and continue to make some destinations more desirable than others. Even when I

ask a hotelier in Las Vegas about his seemlingly complete dependence upon gaming as an attraction, he quickly reminds me of his five clerks who devote their entire activity to helping guests visit the natural resources, such as the mountains, deserts, and lakes surrounding Las Vegas.

I emphasize these seemingly obvious natural resource factors because just recently I had a state leader of tourism say to me that he never realized that resources had anything to do with tourism. Perhaps these factors are so common and abundant, we take them for granted.

We should also recognize the great increase in recent years in the value of cultural resources to tourist attractions. These are man-made in the sense that they are being recycled for tourism. Our historic sites, historic buildings, ethnic events and crafts, interesting manufacturing processes, and outstanding man-made achievements are increasingly important resource bases for attractions. But, they are anchored to specific sites and are not truly man-made in a contemporary sense, like that of a theme park.

Attractions are man-made, yes. But, there is no letup in the popularity of those attractions that have strong natural and cultural resource foundations. As a consequence, I see a trend toward greater environmental protection as an asset to tourism development.

3. Each attraction is an independent entity (Half-truth)

Yes, each attraction is owned and managed by an individual, agency or corporation and it is tied to a specific piece of land. By fostering free enterprise and a market economy in this country, we already have a diversity of attractions unequalled anywhere else in the world. But, at the same time that we have increased the number and diversity of attractions, we have increased confusion in the marketplace. One state promoter told me recently that she intentionally does not give out complete information on all attractions--she wants to save something for the next trip.

And so, along with the great array of separate attractions, we are finding the need for what Naisbitt calls "networking--people sharing ideas, information, and resources." The reason is very simple-- it comes from the traveler, the visitor. If you stop and think about it, the only individual who has the obligation of putting the overall tourism system together is the traveler. He is the only one who cuts across the thousands of separate owners-managers and providers of services and attractions. And, most often, he cares little who owns what as long as his needs are met.

Perhaps no other segment of tourism has done as much to force networking than has the motor coach tour business. This segment is reaching into the tremendous array of services and attractions and systematically linking them into packages. No one else is as sensitive to the traveler's preferences and constraints. This group recognizes the boundaries of time and money and creates packages that will fit a range of time periods and overall costs. In doing so, a network of attractions and services is created.

And so, I will defend the present diversity and independence of attraction ownership and management but also observe the trend toward attraction networks, not only for motorcoach tours but across the board. This may mean greater cooperation than we now practice.

4. Attractions are simple to build (Fallacy).

Obviously, this is a good true-false question on an exam. But, I am afraid that we are seeing the same problem of proliferation of attractions that has happened with restaurants in many cities. This is the problem of entrance of too many amateurs. In the food business, everyone who has prepared their own meals believes in his heart that it is simple to enter the food business. And, to my knowledge, this business has the highest rate of failure. Now, many people who think they know how to have fun believe they can succeed in the attractions business.

But, like any other specialized business, there is much more to it today than in the past. Just having an idea is not enough. Managers of the theme parks today tell me that we will not be seeing any new ones at that scale in the foreseeable future--it just takes too much capital and combination of skills to get the job done. Because of changing building techniques, because of changing markets, and because of changes in finance and labor, the process of developing an attraction is increasingly complicated.

More and more, developers will need to engage specialized designers, planners, financial managers, and even legal departments to establish and maintain attractions. And, as we move more and more into high-tech equipment, even in attractions, we will increasingly need specialized service people to keep everthing running, especially if we discover the computer chips weren't made right.

Even for historic attractions, development is complicated. The proponents of historic preservation as a movement have as their motivation the protection of our heritage. This is excellent and is producing more and more places of historic interest for people to visit. But, merely getting a building restored is not creating an attraction that will function for visitors. Even in building restoration, many questions must be asked:

How pure must the restoration be?
Can we restore the outside to an earlier period and at the same time put a contemporary use inside?
Are we even going to let visitors inside?
If so, will it need to be air conditioned and how can this be done and yet remain in historical context?
Are the artifacts so fragile and valuable that they will be destroyed by visitor use?
Who can we hire to design visitor flows so that the resource can be protected?
Where will we put the restrooms and how will they be designed to meet the needs of 40-passenger busloads?
How much interpretation should we introduce?

No, it is not easy. The complexity of attractions development in the future is going to continue to increase, demanding more and more expertise every day.

5. The kinds of attractions will remain constant (Fallacy).

On the surface, it would appear that our mountains, beaches, and commercial attractions--all have been discovered and developed. We really don't expect to see a new upheaval of a Rocky Mountain range or the creation of a new set of Great Lakes. And, as I mentioned, the large theme park owners see few new ones coming on stream. But, to say that our attractions will remain constant is to deny two very powerful forces of change. These forces are: (1) product creativity and innovation, and
(2) market fluidity.

Our free enterprise system, in spite of ideological arguments to the contrary, is alive and well. In the last few years we have seen in this country a dramatic revival of creativity and innovation in business. Increased economic incentives and a tradition of new and better ways of doing things are stimulating the introduction of many new leisure items that carry over into travel.

Travel and tourism product creativity will predictably continue to increase, providing the traveler with new and unusually interesting travel objectives. But, to do so, we must continue to break down the many barriers to product creativity and innovation. It is a difficult task to launch a new attraction because we are fighting tradition, fighting institutions, and frequently we are fighting apathy.

And now, to expand on the point of market fluidity, let me turn to point 6.

6. Successful attractions are for the average tourist (Fallacy).

I hear this comment from some tourist attraction managers: "I want to serve as many tourists as possible." On the surface, there is nothing wrong with the objective of greater volume of business.

But, in tourism, as those of you in marketing well know, there is no such thing as the average tourist. And yet, this has been our premise for tourism development for many years. It's like the tailor who would make a suit to the average of man's dimensions--it wouldn't fit anyone.

As far as trends are concerned, the market is increasingly fluid. Educational levels of travelers continue to increase. And, in recent years, in spite of the recession, we have more travelers with higher incomes. These combine to form what one market firm calls the age of "the conscious consumer"--one very much concerned about quality, about service, and especially about health and saftey. In tourism, we have had it relatively easy in the past--almost anything sold. This is no longer true. The clever catch words of the past are no longer enough. People demand value.

As many people in marketing of tourism are now recognizing, tourism attractions, more and more, need to be geared to specific segments of the market--not the average tourist. The principle of clustering attractions in order to increase economic viability of service businesses still holds. But, each attraction or each attraction element, more and more will demand specialized marketing.

An interesting clue to this appeared in a motel chain's travel magazine lately. The chain caters heavily to an older citizenry. Letters to the editor asked questions, such as when the next worlds fair would take place. They had visited every one since the 1939/40 fair in New York. Another asked for a golf tour for senior citizens. And another asked where archeological excavations could be visited by the elderly. The editors could answer only one of these with any recommendation.

The market keeps moving and it will be increasingly difficult for fixed attractions to keep pace.

7. Attractions have equal potential everywhere (Fallacy).

One of the lessons we in tourism have not learned as well as those in agriculture or petroleum is that all lands do not have equal potential for development. In most states, we are still bound by a misdirected belief in equality. State tourism agencies and regional chambers of commerce for tourism do have an obligation to distribute dollars fairly. But, I argue that it is not fair to give the same dollars to an area that has relatively sterile potential compared to one with much more abundant opportunities.

For many years, a few of us have been studying this problem and believe we have made some progress. At least we now have a list of what we think are key factors that can be used in assessing tourism potential. I am not talking about marketing existing attractions but rather the task of determining those areas that may have the greatest potential if money and talent were applied to them to establish new attractions.

For one thing, we now believe that we need to separate in our assessment the foundations for touring-through tourist development compared to that catering to destination tourism. The resources, development, management, and promotion are not quite the same for these two types of markets. For most destination travelers, they require attractions at resorts, camps and convention centers that can be repeated day after day. Whereas those coming through on touring circuits don't wish to participate in the same attraction more than once.

Therefore, I suggest that we need to be looking ahead toward new state and organizational policy that recognizes and provides incentives to those areas with the greatest potential for future tourism, especially in establishing new attractions.

8. Attractions are primarily attractors (Half-truth).

This statement seems logically true, based upon its face value. Yes, attractions, by definition, must attract. They must have pulling power sufficient for you and me to travel away from home. Yet, this is only half

the function of attractions--a point very important to both developers and marketers of attractions. They must also provide satisfactions.

The past measure of the success of attractions has been mostly visitor count. The future measure will add to this the psychological and sociological extent of satisfaction. All attractions must be rewarding. And, until we have better research on visitor's reactions to attractions, we are guessing about their rewarding qualities. While no one can positively predict exactly where or when I will have fun or be pleased with my experience at an attraction, we can learn a lot by closing the gap between management and the visitor. The new trend in all business is greater awareness and sensitivity to the buyers. This is no less important in our field.

Sometimes in our zeal to attract, we do not always satisfy. Not long ago, in Texas we were highly successful in attracting a new market of Canadians to South Padre Island. But, an angrier group of tourists you have never seen because they were merely dumped in some condominium units and not linked with the many attractions of the surrounding area. I am told that in some theme parks, a premature announcement of a new ride has actually depressed attendance before the ride opened.

Our marketing must be closely related to the total product and the expected satisfactions to be derived from a visit.

Let me try to summarize these points in terms of trends and challenges.

* Attractions are not necessarily better understood today even in this era of communication explosion. We still need more and better visitor information.

* As we trend toward man-made attractions, we must not lose sight of the importance of natural and cultural resources and the need for their protection.

* Attractions cannot stand alone. More networking and therefore greater cooperation between attractions--owners and marketers--will be needed.

* Attractions predictably will be more difficult to establish and manage in the future, for many reasons--especially increased technology and shifts in markets.

* Rather than attractions remaining constant, they will continue to multiply due to increased stimulation of entrepreneurship and creativity on the product side and to changes in markets on the demand side.

* Attractions, to be successful in the future, will need to segment their markets. This will need to be reflected in what's offered, how it is managed, and how it is promoted.

* Because of geographic and resource differences and because of different markets, we will see new destinations emerge, and some fade.

* It will be increasingly important to move from marketing attractions as things to attractions as potentially satisfying experiences.

It has been a real pleasure to have the opportunity of sharing with you a professor's perspective on attraction trends.