

Conference Coverage

Shop America Conference Highlights Best Practices

By Carolyn J. Feimster SCMD, President, CJF Marketing International, North Brunswick, NJ

THE 13TH ANNUAL SHOP AMERICA TOURISM CONFERENCE, HELD JANUARY 11-13, 2010 AT THE FOUR SEASONS HOTEL IN LAS VEGAS, gave attendees the opportunity to network, discuss and debate what the future holds for shopping tourism in 2010 and beyond. The fact that we could get extremely affordable rates at a beautiful Four Seasons property sends the message that it continues to be all about the “deal” and offering value.

Both the shopping industry and the tourism industry have changed. Will things ever go back to the way they were? The message underlying most of the presentations this year was a clear “no,” but that sharper, more focused and more strategic companies will emerge from the worldwide recession—perhaps even stronger than before—by doing business in a new way.

I attended the very first Shop America Conference in Napa, CA, 13 years ago, and friendships fostered there still last. That is the real benefit of these conferences. In 13 years, I have only missed two. It continues to be an interesting path, beginning with defining what shopping tourism is and how shopping centers can benefit from the visitor market. I remember years ago, while working a travel trade show in South America, being asked by a hotel director of sales why I was there representing a mall. My answer: “Where do you send your guests when it rains?” Oh yeah, to the mall!

Years later, research from the U.S. Department of Commerce proved that shopping and dining are the number one

and two activities for the domestic and international traveler. Those (though the two positions change from time to time) still remain the top two activities.

Today there seems to be a revival in shopping tourism as indicated by the number of attendees at this year’s conference and the renewed interest in developing tourism programs. There were several “takeaways” from the conference, all having to do with how to work smarter and more strategically.

What’s New with SAA?

Shopping packages continue to sell well on top travel sites like Expedia. There is new and exciting research on shopping/cultural tourism. A new Shop America web site was launched, and the AAA partnership is still strong.

“Packaging is clearly the way to promote your shopping center to the visitor market. According to Expedia, the average traveler will shop five or six different travel web sites before making their purchasing decision. If you are not visible on a number of sites, you are not maximizing your potential,” explained Rosemary

McCormick, president of Shop America Alliance.

It’s All About the Outlets

This seemed to be a recurring theme, to the point that it almost reminded me of the days when *Time* magazine ran the controversial cover proclaiming the death of the mall when Internet shopping emerged. We survived that and there continues to be room for outlet shopping, town center shopping, marketplace shopping and even regional mall shopping for the visitor market. After all, visitors want a variety of shopping and dining opportunities.

Outlet guru Karen Fluharty gave the keynote luncheon presentation, which was appropriate because approximately 40 percent of the attendees were from the outlet industry. “It is all about the relationship with the brands and their value,” she explained. She discussed how the industry has evolved from a place to get rid of merchandise that would not sell at full price to a legitimate way of doing business. “It is all about ROR – Return on Relationship,” concluded Fluharty. More on her outstanding accomplishments will be covered in a subsequent article.

Social Media

Most exciting and with the greatest potential were the sessions on social media. The questions are how to best inte-

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Value and the Deal

We have all heard about the difficult times Las Vegas went through as a result of the "AIG Affect" and the decline in the conventions and meetings market. Art Jimenez, senior director of leisure sales for the Las Vegas CVA, presented a case study on what they did to bring business back.

"We made over 4000 face-to-face calls between late 2008 and summer 2009 to re-establish relationships and to build new ones," he said. "Our prior success as a top market may have made it easier to book business, so we went back to the basics and dusted off that old sales call sheet and used it effectively," Jimenez explained. This is an excellent example of how companies who act smart will emerge stronger from the recession.

The Next Wave of Technology

The statistics are staggering regarding smart phone use. If you promote your stores and restaurants to the visitor market once they are in your destination and you don't have a mobile marketing strategy in place, you are missing the boat. "The key is to recognize that mobile marketing is not a stand-alone tactic, but needs to be integrated into your overall marketing program. The

important point is to understand the difference between a .com site and a .mobi site. They are not interchangeable if you want your information to be easily read on a smart phone," explained Franci Edgerly, president and CEO of ITI Marketing.

The Statistics

The stats are in and there are no surprises. Travel is down and so is spending, but a lot of people are still traveling, and these travelers are still shopping. England continues to lead the long-haul market. They got really tired of stay-cations, which resulted in pent-up demand for travel. The German market never did feel the credit crunch, so they continue to travel. Mexicans still come for shopping, and Brazil is re-emerging as an important shopping market.

The Travel Promotion Act (JONESREPORT Plus, Dec., 2009) passed the House but has been held up by a procedural delay in the Senate.

Tourism Person of the Year

This year Kathy Anderson, SCMD, president of AZ Travel Marketing and Anderson Retail Tourism Marketing, was recognized as shopping tourism person of the year. A leader in the shopping center industry for two decades, Anderson has been on the cutting edge of tourism marketing, winning ICSC's first tourism B-to-B MAXI award in 2006 for GGP's corporate tourism program, America's Premier Shopping Places. Her new international endeavor, Shop & Dine London, will be featured

in an upcoming JONESREPORT Plus article.

Winners of Shop America's SASI awards are listed on page 16.

We are continuing this series of articles on tourism every other month and would like to focus on some of the more innovative programs. Please submit your programs to me, either via e-mail at Carolyn@CJFMarketingInternational.com, fax (732/545-3138) or mail. If possible, include samples of your graphics. Full credit will be given to the person or team responsible for the program. Visit our new web site: www.cjfmarketinginternational.com. ■

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