

Winning Scholar Dollars

How You Can Capitalize on the Student Travel Market

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The student market — travel by youth 25 and under, away from their community, not for business and not primarily to visit friends or relatives — is one of the fastest growing markets in the travel and tourism industry. In September, I attended the Student & Youth Travel Association (SYTA) Annual Conference in Boston and saw first-hand the tremendous potential for tourism-oriented shopping centers.

This is part one of a two part series about what makes this market so important and how you can capitalize on it.

We have identified many niche markets in the travel industry that shopping center professionals we can develop. However, the student travel market is often overlooked. The stats alone justify targeting this group. Twenty-four percent of all international travel worldwide is youth/student travelers. That is a huge number, especially with 85 million young people in the US and Canada between the ages of five and 25. Plus, there are approximately 18 million students in US and Canadian colleges and universities.

But it is much more than just another niche market. SYTA, now celebrating its 10th Anniversary, has a membership of 659, comprised of tour operators who offer student travel programs and suppliers who want to capitalize on this market. While, of course, everyone is in the travel business to make money, there was a consistent theme of it being “all about the kids” and providing opportunities for kids five to 25 to experience life through travel. During a pre-conference web seminar

Michael Palmer, executive director of SYTA, said “We sell fun and memories.” He explained that SYTA exists to improve the marketplace and provide opportunities for members to capitalize on this market. One way is by participating in the trade show, which offers numerous opportunities to make contacts with the tour operators who sell this market.

Fastest Growing Segment

You may ask yourself why you should spend the time and money to work with the student market. There are several reasons. Not only is it a large market, but it's the fastest growing market segment in the industry. Also, student population continues to grow, more students are traveling at earlier ages and international travel started to increase last year. Travel has become an expectation of the school system, and relevance to curriculum is becoming an important component of the experience. Trips can be day-trips or overnight tours, domestic or international travel.

Some shopping centers are already capitalizing on this market. Lisa Kunkler McClure, VP marketing and tourism manager, Union Station in

Washington, DC, said, “We provide a great blend for the student market as there is plenty of history and architecture for the kids to learn about as well as a terrific food court and shopping.” She said tourists represent 33.3% of her total market, and that students make up five to seven percent of that. We will explore her programs and others in part two of this article.

This market is also attractive because is easy to identify and to reach, and it is good for off season time. There is high repeat business. Groups are usually large — two or more buses. There are minimal last-minute cancellations, and there is high disposable income. Most important, you are ‘seed-ing’ future business — these kids are the travelers and shoppers of the future.

They Like Shopping Centers

Another key factor is that the tour operators like to work with shopping centers! “Malls are a core part of many of our student tours because, with a food court, we can offer variety and quickly feed our groups inexpensively. Many malls allow our groups to perform, which, besides providing a weather-protected venue, also give us a built-in audience. Also, the older groups have a place to shop during the evening hours when we look for fun and safe activities,” explained Greg Shipley, CEO of Academic Travel Services.

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Types of Student Travel

There are two primary groups of student travel: educational travel and music/performance travel. Smaller groups include sports and leisure travel, summer travel, language travel, graduation trips, spring breaks, backpackers, studies abroad and volunteerism travel. The latter focuses on kids going to remote parts of the world for a week or two to volunteer for the betterment of the community. They also help in places in the US such as in post-Katrina New Orleans. "More of these kinds of volunteer programs are being incorporated into a trip – in part because community service is required for graduation," Palmer explained.

It is important to understand how these groups travel. The younger groups of primary and secondary school age are focused on safety, structured itineraries, fast-paced programs and education, combined with some fun. Adults make all itinerary decisions. Groups of high school and college students want unstructured itineraries with students being part of the decision process. They want entertainment-oriented travel as well as special interest travel. The high school student traveler is more lucrative because they typically travel farther and stay longer. A recent trend, according to Palmer, is multi-dimensional travel, which offers a variety of experiences and combines education with leisure.

The top domestic markets for student travel, in order, are New York, Washington, DC, Florida, Massachusetts, Vir-

ginia, California, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Illinois and Maryland. However, your center can be a stop for the motor-coach en route to the destination.

Amenities that Matter

What students look for when they travel:

- Student/youth-friendly and helpful staff at shopping centers and in their stores
- The ability to handle large groups
- Easy check-in for meet and greets
- Quality entertainment
- An environment lending itself to good group management
- Educational components
- The ability to deal with short attention spans, especially for younger students
- A location near other major attractions
- A group-friendly briefing/meeting area
- Hands-on activities
- Multi-media/multi-sensory activities
- Technology-driven activities.

How Shopping Centers Fit In

Let's explore the two primary groups of travel – educational and musical performance groups.

Educational trips are approved by the school, principal or school board. The teachers make the decisions in some cases, and they tell the tour operator what they want to include in the itinerary. However, many times, especially if the destination is unfamiliar to the teacher, they will rely on the

tour operator's recommendations. One way you can fit in is to offer group meals. After all, three meals a day have to be planned, and you should try to be the location for either lunch or dinner by working with your food court vendors or restaurants who know how to handle group business. Themed restaurants are popular with the student market, and most are very savvy when it comes to groups.

Treat Them Well

Musical performance travelers are great for your center because they provide free entertainment. I attended a seminar during SYTA about how to work with this group and some of the best advice I heard was to, "Treat every group as if they are the best group in the world." It is important to make it a positive experience for the group so that the school will want to come back every year. Package the performance space with a meal and include time to shop. This could be very lucrative. In some cases, the performance space is offered for free, which was the case at South Street Seaport in New York City until just recently. Now, a nominal fee of \$50 is charged, and there have been no complaints.

During the session on performance groups it was pointed out that the main thing they want is an audience. That may sound silly, but a lot of attractions promote themselves as a performance venue, but don't have an audience. Shopping centers are attractive because we offer an audience. You will have to take into consideration loading/unloading issues,

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10th Annual Shop America Tourism Conference

The 10th Annual Shop America Tourism Conference will be held January 15-17, 2007, at the Red Rock Resort in Las Vegas. Program and registration information are available at www.shopamericavip.com.

SASI Awards

SASI (Shop America Salutes Innovation in Shopping and Dining Tourism Marketing) Awards winners and finalists will be honored at the Shop America Tourism Conference's SASI Awards luncheon sponsored by CenterCal Properties.

Visit www.shopamericavip.com and click on the SASI Awards image for an official entry form. No fee to enter. Deadline for entries is 12/1/06.

For more information contact: Cathi Greenstein at 203/204-2399 or ShopAmerica@comcast.net.

Student Travel

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changing facilities and equipment. Again, at South Street Seaport there is no equipment available, so groups either bring what they need or rent it.

Festival Bay Mall in Orlando promoted to the student market right from their opening. “We offer student groups a beautiful indoor performance area with a water feature as a backdrop where they can showcase their talents and offer great photo ops. This can be packaged with meal and dessert vouchers and discount coupons,” said Marketing Manager Jessica Luttfiring. The space is offered at no fee.

How to Reach Them

Some attractions elect to market directly to the teachers, principals and school board. You can use direct mail, but you will need teachers’ names. Since teachers always look for material for their bulletin board, your collateral piece might be just the thing. Another idea is to dedicate part of your website to this market. Also, you can add “student groups are welcome” to your materials. Consider developing a stand-alone collateral piece.

It makes more sense to target the tour operators, and a

good place to start is with those who are members of SYTA. As with any tour operator, you must develop and maintain a relationship with them. You must also offer the product they are seeking. So what is that? The tour operators are looking for meals at restaurants that cater to groups, food court dining vouchers, coupon books, performance space and educational opportunities. They like the voucher because they know the students will receive a good meal – which is not guaranteed when they are given cash. Also, as one tour operator said, “We just want to give them a few hours to shop.” Music to my ears!

Let’s explore the educational opportunities. Certainly, if you have a museum at your center – as in the case of the Seaport Museum at South Street Seaport – that is a natural for this market. Or partner with a museum that is close and offer the tour operator a group rate for the museum and lunch at one of your restaurants. “When we attend trade shows we always include materials from our museum because it adds to the overall package we offer, regardless if it is for student groups or others,” explained Julie Nicholasi, marketing manager, South Street Seaport.

Next month we will continue to explore ways to capitalize on the student market by covering the Annual SYTA Conference. We will also look at what some other centers are doing to promote to this market. ■

CJF Marketing International offers a range of services for creating and implementing strategic tourism, economic development and marketing programs for shopping centers, urban entertainment projects, downtown retail districts, communities and commercial properties globally. The firm also offers educational programs and seminars for corporate meeting planners, shopping center developers, communities and re-development agencies. Feimster can be reached by phone at 732/249-6080 or by fax at 732/545-3138. Visit her website at cjfmarketinginternational.com.
