

Shop, Play, Stay ...

Unique Public/Private Partnership Markets Turnpike Exit as Destination

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

BECAUSE DEVELOPING THE TOURISM BUSINESS IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF BOTH THE DESTINATION AND THE SUPPLIERS WHO WISH TO BENEFIT FROM THE VISITOR MARKET, a public/private partnership program is an excellent way to pursue that market. This month we are featuring a program coordinated by a local chamber of commerce and capitalized on by a shopping center.

“Shop, Play, Stay at Exit 13A” is a regional tourism marketing campaign designed to promote the many options tourists have when they exit at 13A off the New Jersey Turnpike. The purpose is to promote exclusive offers at the many shopping, dining, entertainment and hotel locations in Elizabeth, NJ, where this exit is located. Formerly, 13 A was known just for the Newark Liberty International Airport, but through aggressive economic development the area has become a true destination. Anyone who has lived in New Jersey knows people don’t ask where you live, they ask, “What exit are you off the Turnpike?” This campaign turns a “state-of-mind” into a successful and creative tourism marketing initiative!

Coordinated by the Greater Elizabeth Chamber of Commerce (GECC) a year ago, this true public/private initiative was spearheaded by Elizabeth Mayor Chris Bollwage to help introduce a regional audience in New Jersey, New York, Connecticut and Pennsylvania to the growing number of opportunities now at Exit 13A. “Elizabeth’s Exit 13A is one exit with many choices,” explains Mayor Bollwage. “At Exit 13A

you’ll find the best outlet mall, a state-of-the-art movie palace, world-class home furnishings, great restaurants and terrific hotels so you can shop, play and even stay at 13A.”

The GECC took the lead

by organizing business partners to participate in the Exit 13A cooperative marketing effort. “With such high caliber businesses all located around one exit, it made a lot of sense to team them together and market the one thing they all had in common – proximity to the Turnpike’s Exit 13A,” noted GECC Executive Director Gordon Haas. “This may be the first time anyone has marketed an exit!”

“For us, the idea really started six years ago during our opening,” explained Crystal Stell, marketing director of Jersey Gardens, the state’s largest outlet mall. “Imagine opening on a former landfill — now that is some stigma to overcome! Plus, there was nothing out here

except the airport, and no one knew we were here. We knew the city was pro-development and that it was just a matter of time before additional major business would open. Last year we realized we finally had the critical mass to promote our destination!”

Stell explained that as with most shopping centers, budget was an issue, and the market area commanded high advertising rates. “This partnership was

definitely the right decision and the best way to proceed in order to reinforce the efforts we had already started,” she said.

What they did next was to apply for state funding, both through the State of New Jersey’s Urban Enterprise Zone and through the state’s Division of Tourism. The mall had previously applied for a state grant, but it took the partners’ cooperation for the state to agree to the funding. As a result, almost \$200,000 was raised for the campaign, with the mall contributing just \$25,000.

“For several years during meetings, networking functions and wherever we could, we would discuss the idea of this cooperative effort,” Stell

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Marketing an Exit

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explained. "Finally, we had enough interest and players to implement it." It was quickly determined that the GECC would be the best entity to coordinate and facilitate the program, and 10 partners came on board. In addition to the mall, they included IKEA-Elizabeth, Lowes Cineplex, six hotels and the airport, with a positioning statement of "One exit. Many choices." All this to capitalize on the 180,000 cars that pass by on the Turnpike every day.

The goal was to position Exit 13A as a destination for leisure visitors from the tri-state area of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. Marketing tools included a billboard campaign, rack card distribution along the highways, City Guide magazines for the three states, the "Best Of" section in *Philadelphia* magazine and the web sites of nj.com and silive.com. Part of the strategy was to drive hits to the Exit13A.com website. They also sponsored a summer concert series at the PNC Art Center. Radio was used the first summer, but the committee decided to spend more on billboards the second summer.

The first summer campaign drew a tremendous amount of media coverage. Even the *New York Times* wrote an article and there was TV coverage. The Exit 13A program is designed to be a summer drive time promotion, but as funding increases it is hoped that it can become a year-round program.

As a result of raising funds and leveraging co-op marketing dollars, a multi-dimensional advertising and marketing campaign was launched and repeated for the second summer in a row.

I asked Stell how this program fits into her overall tourism marketing program.

"Tourists account for 20% of our market, and we see them as our biggest opportunity for growth. We have focused on domestic and international travel, with excellent programs in place. The missing component was the regional drive leisure market. This program effectively brings us that market," she explained.

She went on to describe her partnership with New Jersey Transit, which brings buses from the Port Authority in Manhattan every hour for a total of 16,000 passengers a month! This figure has doubled from what it was at opening. There is a round trip charge of \$8 and the Port Authority is reimbursed for the passengers who turn in a voucher they received from the tour operator. Also, Stell runs her own shuttle bus from Newark Airport every 15 minutes. At only \$1 for the return ticket, this brings in 10,000 people a month. During the holidays, Stell will provide coat, bag and luggage check points.

Renee Ward, a marketing representative who works and lives in the UK, represents Jersey Gardens to the overseas tour operators. She works on a voucher program with the operators to provide complimentary transportation from the Port Authority. Stell budgets money

to reimburse the Port Authority because, as she says, "We understand how lucrative that 'Euro-shopper' is to us and want to make sure they visit Jersey Gardens when in New York. We distribute 30,000 vouchers a year just in Germany." And, my research shows that if a property is not conveniently located in a city and you are in a market like New York, where visitors typically do not rent a car, it is absolutely essential to offer transportation. (See JONESREPORT Plus article on the Lucrative Euro-Shopper in the October 2005 issue.)

Other tourist programs include an aggressive motor-coach program with 2000 buses a year. Plus, Stell also has a referral program with area hotel concierges. Hotel guests receive shopping and dining discounts and she pays incentives on a sliding scale to the concierge.

"We are most proud that this year we were named an Official New Jersey Welcome Center," Stell said. "All of us in the industry understand it takes years to build a successful tourism marketing program. Many people do not want to wait the time it takes to develop the program. However, if you are patient and keep at it, you will see results."

For more information on the innovative regional drive program, visit Exit13A.com.

We are continuing this series of articles on tourism every other month and would like to focus on innovative tourism programs. Please submit your programs to me, either via e-mail Carolyn@CJFMarketingInternational.com, fax 732/545-3138 or mail. If possible, include samples of your graphics via e-mail. 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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