

Part II

How a Group of Malls and Resorts Made Themselves into a Destination

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LAST MONTH WE INTRODUCED YOU TO SANDESTINATION, OUR NEW DESTINATION IN NORTHWEST FLORIDA CREATED TO MARKET THE SANDESTIN ALLIANCE. *The Alliance is comprised of four shopping centers and four hotel brands working together. The newly launched brand was a SASI award winner (Shop America Salutes Innovation) during the recent annual Shop America Global Shop Summit in Dallas, TX.*

After developing the Sandestination.com website, the challenge was to get the message out to promote visitors to the site and travel to Sandestination. Because this is a new brand, the marketing strategies were very different from those promoting an existing brand. The first tactical approach we took was with the website itself. Prior to going live, we hired a local company, Creative WITS, to take our website text, which was written in “marketing lingo,” and translate it into “web lingo,” a very different form of writing if you want the search engines to find you.

Lorraine Christen, co-owner, Creative WITS Marketing and Public Relations, explains, “The goal of search engine optimization (SEO) is to increase your website’s visibility among search engines. SEO incorporates an understanding of how customers search for your products or offerings online, which keywords they may use and how the search engines look for websites with relevant content. It is essential to incorporate those key words and phrases into your website content.”

Another way to expose a new website is to establish links

to other websites. Obviously, there are links to/from partner websites, and we are researching other sites, such as area DMOs, that we can link to as well.

The last article mentioned launching our first package, Christmas on the Coast. It was on the Sandestination.com website under Vacation Packages. Because the website was so new, it was important to also list the package on all four partner hotel sites. It included a complimentary gift bag at hotel check-in with a welcome letter highlighting key components and merchant offers such as valet parking, complimentary appetizers, wine tastings and desserts, as well as make-up consultation. The gift bag also included a list of events taking place throughout the holidays at all eight partners, a list of discounts and incentives from all four shopping partners (including a coupon book of over \$800 in savings from Silver Sands Factory Stores and complimentary Internet in certain locations).

Consumers could browse the package on the Internet and decide which hotel they wanted to book. A link took them directly to that hotel so there

was no need to worry about any difference in rates. A total of 25 packages were sold in December, not bad for a first time effort!

The next package is the Sandestination Escape Package. This will live on the Sandestination website as well as on the hotel partners’ websites all year and will be similar to the Christmas on the Coast package, sans holiday references. Additionally, we will build packages throughout the year that will tie in to specific buying seasons and to major events taking place at any of the partner’s venues. This demonstrates the value of the Alliance. Instead of one venue hosting and advertising its event, they now have additional ways to get their individual messages out.

In today’s travel economy the ability to act quickly and be flexible is important. In addition to developing packages to promote girlfriend getaways, shop and spa vacations, etc., we will be able to capitalize on current travel industry trends, such as last summer’s “staycations.”

Due to the significance of the Internet in travel planning I cannot emphasize enough the importance of a multi-layered marketing campaign that includes a strong online marketing strategy. As with any successful marketing campaign, while no one can afford the luxury of hitting all media, the proper mix needs to be

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Creating a Destination

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determined and used to its full potential.

One popular consumer travel website we are considering is Vacations2Discover.com. However, inclusion in their Florida page would not be enough to gain the exposure necessary to launch a new destination. We are considering our own landing page. This would provide adequate real estate to communicate our many messages. We are considering Destinations2Discover.com's trade website, also with our own landing page.

Working with Franci Edgerly, the sites' president and owner, we are able to establish a true partnership, which is important when launching a new brand. The company provides a comprehensive internet/social network marketing approach. In addition to the websites, they offer mobile marketing, e-learning and training, interactive informational kiosks, interactive maps and even sweepstakes.

After completing a media web analysis and researching various opportunities, our advertising agency, Infinitee, in conjunction with their media partner, McCulloch & Company, recommended using the travel website tripadvisor.com. A buy on tripadvisor.com was strategically placed in five targeted feeder markets. Jocelyn Smith, managing partner of Infinitee, stated, "There were numerous reasons for selecting tripadvisor.com as our primary travel website, including its abundance of user-generated

content and its reputation as a vacationer's resource and advocate." Advertising on the site will include leaderboards, large rectangles and skyscrapers both in the feeder markets and on the Destin landing page.

Another important facet of our multi-layered marketing approach is a comprehensive public relations outreach. A public relations committee developed a Partner's PR Tool Kit so everyone would be on the same page when it came to message points. This is necessary with so many partners who have their own messages. The tool kit provides a fact sheet, frequently asked questions, communication style guidelines, graphic standards for using the logo and various formats of the logo.

Theoperator.com, which targets the travel trade, is also under consideration. We're looking at a landing page with plenty of value added, such as editorial under other parts of the site, value-added promotion listings for the shopping centers, sample itinerary and an e-marketing campaign.

ShopAmericaTours.com offers probably the best visibility when it comes to selling the packages. With the top tour operators and online travel agents under contract, strong packages with plenty of added value can achieve remarkable exposure on websites such as Travelocity.com and Expedia.com. As with any partnership, the idea is to have a win-win situation where the supplier can offer superior packages in return for impressive exposure and the tour operator can earn a commission.

Shop America Tours now markets more than 200 packages in 40 US cities.

Next month's final article in this series will address alternative methods for starting an alliance or consortium so you can better develop and manage a program best suited to your needs, as well as the needs of your community.

We are continuing this series of articles on tourism every other month and would like to focus on some of the more innovative tourism 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 via e-mail. Full credit will be given to the person or team responsible for the program. Visit our new website: www.cjfmarketinginternational.com. ■

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