

Brand Canada Blog

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It's a Hard Knock Life

Imagine being charged with marketing a product that you can't control to an audience you can't define when the entire world is literally your competition and all your neighbours are shareholders. Oh -- and no one is really in charge and everyone else has larger budgets than you. Welcome to the world of your local tourism authority.

Governed from the top by legislators and boards and ruled from the bottom by industry committees and individual operators, the tourism authority exists only at the pleasure of its myriad constituents. It's dependent on government funding, but often can't spend a dime without the co-operation of its private sector partners.

Unlike other association-based marketers, the Tourism Authority's message is subject to the competing priorities of its individual partners. The Milk Marketing Board doesn't have to worry about individual farmers mounting their own campaigns with divergent messages touting the benefits of milk, but the tourism authority is only really effective if it convinces its dozens, hundreds or even thousands of industry partners, each with their own marketing budgets, to row in the same direction.

In this environment, it's a wonder tourism authorities ever get anything done. But some are. Because they've managed to shift the paradigm in their business from being an organization focused on co-ordination and driven by consensus to being true marketing resources to their industries.

Some tourism authorities have managed to move beyond the age-old mantra of being "industry-led" to focus on developing innovative ideas that can inspire and unite their industry. They've gotten out of the business of selling "programs" and into the business of creating ideas that their partners want to buy into.

Australia has made the shift, Canada is well on its way, and the USA is taking tentative steps in the right direction.

A key factor that's driving this change is an aspect of the internet that is sometimes overlooked as the industry focuses on online channels as a tool for commerce. As the world's online community has become more global in nature, so too have destination brands. The days when tourism authorities could position themselves differently in different markets are long over. What's the point of creating unique campaigns for every geo-market when the consumer's next step is to go onto tripadvisor.com and review the global consensus on your city, hotel or attraction?

Computer, fashion and packaged goods marketers have increasingly taken a global approach to positioning and communicating their brands, but Australia is one of the few countries that have adopted the same approach.

The logic is simple. Greater alignment in the industry translates into a greater cumulative impact and a better return on everyone's investments. It's not about homogenizing the entire industry, it's about finding the common threads that link each level of the industry together within a destination, then differentiating individual brands while maintaining the common centre of gravity.

Think of tourism brands like Russian dolls. Each one relates to and is dependent on the other, but each finds their own place in the set and stands alone as a unique individual.