



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Destination Marketing & Management

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jdmm

Regional Spotlights

Selling America to the world: The case of Brand USA

Simon Hudson*

College of Hospitality, Retail and Sport Management, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC, USA



ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 December 2013

Accepted 31 January 2014

Available online 25 February 2014

Keywords:

Destination branding

Brand USA

Marketing

Social media

ABSTRACT

Astonishingly, America has never embarked on a coordinated international campaign to sell itself to potential overseas visitors. But in response to a decade of stagnant visitor numbers, and a weakening brand image, America launched its first-ever branding initiative in 2012. Called Brand USA, marketers used key consumer insights gained from in-depth research to develop a campaign that focused on the diversity, pop culture, optimistic spirit and larger than life presence of the country, inviting visitors to see, hear and feel the U.S. in a new way. This regional spotlight takes a closer look at this effort, providing valuable insight for both academics and practitioners into the process of branding a destination.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

As the study and practice of destination branding has evolved over the last decade, academics and practitioners alike seem to agree on the multi-stage methods necessary for building a successful destination brand (Hudson & Ritchie, 2009; Knapp & Sherwin, 2005; Morgan, Pritchard & Piggott, 2003). The first stage is an evaluation of the current situation, and that includes understanding the core values of the destination and its brand, how relevant the brand is to tourists, and how it compares with major competitors.

Following a market analysis, the next stage is to develop the destination's brand identity and promise. This involves understanding the brand's personality, which can have both a head (its logical features) and a heart (its emotional benefits) (Morgan et al., 2003). Brand positioning and communications can be grounded on either, although in recent years, there has been an acknowledgement that a successful destination brand needs to have an emotional pull; one that promises a memorable travel experience (Blain, Levy & Ritchie, 2005; Hudson & Ritchie, 2009; Knapp & Sherwin, 2005; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003).

The third stage of building a destination brand is the most visible and involves communicating the brand promise through promotional campaigns, advertisements and other message types such as logos or taglines. The Internet, and social media in particular, are increasingly being used as platforms to launch brands and to build engagement with consumers (MillwardBrown, 2009; Sparkloft Media, 2011). Finally, the brand building process should end with an evaluation of the brand's effectiveness or performance (Blain et al., 2005; Ritchie & Ritchie, 1998). A constant monitoring of marketing

communications efforts is critical, and brand managers must be willing to embrace change if the campaign is not performing well.

But not all destinations follow this structured approach to building a destination brand. Often logos and promotional materials are developed without conducting research or pursuing a defined strategy (Zenker & Martin, 2003), and many do not employ sophisticated evaluation methods to measure the success of their efforts (Faulkner, 1997).

So how did the marketers behind America's first ever tourism branding initiative adhere to these theoretical principles?

In terms of assessing the destination's current situation, the history of the U.S.'s first nationally coordinated marketing effort goes back a few years. Between 2000 and 2010, a period described as "The Lost Decade" (Dow, 2011), the country's share of international arrivals declined by 36 percent – from 17 percent to 12.4 percent. The US Travel Association (2011) estimated that the associated economic costs of this decline were a loss of 78 million visitors, equating to \$606 billion in spending and support for 467,000 jobs annually. It was suggested that a key reason for the decline was that the U.S. did not have a coordinated collaborative marketing effort, while other countries like Australia, France, Spain, the U.K. and India were spending between 100 and 400 million dollars annually attracting tourists to their shores (NTTC, 2010).

In response to this decline, the Travel Promotion Act of 2011 established Brand USA to oversee the country's first global marketing effort to promote the U.S. as a travel destination. Formed as the Corporation for Travel Promotion, the public-private entity commenced operations in May 2011 and conducts business as Brand USA. Brand USA is funded through a \$14 fee on tourists from the 37 countries whose citizens don't require a visa to visit the U.S. program. The organization is allowed to use up to \$100 million a year, provided it obtains matching contributions from the tourism private sector.

* Tel.: +1 803 777 2705; fax: +1 803 777 6427.

E-mail address: shudson@hrsm.sc.edu

Brand USA engaged marketing agency, JWT, to understand the perceptions of the U.S. around the world. Through several roundtable sessions with international planners, and a quantitative research study among 3000 travelers, JWT discovered that America was perceived as unwelcoming, overly familiar, brash and arrogant. Essentially, America had become “middle-aged”, neither as attractive as the historical destinations of Europe, nor as appealing as the newcomers of the East. JWT also set out to uncover existing traveler’s motives for visiting the U.S. Using an innovative research technique designed to tap into respondents’ deepest feelings about the U.S., visitors were asked to write “America’s postcard”, telling America about their experiences in the U.S (Brand USA, 2013a). Their sentiments revealed that people love the freedom of America where everything is larger than life, and they see it is country full of diversity where anything is possible.

These insights helped inform JWT’s approach to bringing the U.S. brand to life with a new identity and promise. The creative task was to create a perceptual shift away from a brand personality of being brash and unwelcoming, to being fresh, unexpected, welcoming, with a sense of freedom and possibility. The brand promise was therefore “*The United States of Awesome Possibilities Welcomes Everyone*”, and the key message of the initial marketing campaign was “*Discover This Land, Like Never Before.*” The intention of this call to action was to remind the world’s travelers that the U.S. was a land of possibilities and limitless experiences (Brand USA, 2013a). Marketers identified four experience pillars to help frame and balance the messaging—the great outdoors, urban excitement, indulgence, and culture. These pillars were used as a guide to help create messaging across all of the marketing platforms. A new logo was created – an arrangement of dots that fastened together to harmonize the letters “USA” – the concept grounded in the ideals of diversity and unlimited possibilities. Underneath the three letters was “DiscoverAmerica.com”.

After four rounds of creative testing in 13 international markets, it was decided to use the universal language of music as a cornerstone of the campaign. Rosanne Cash, daughter of American music legend Johnny Cash, composed an original song, *Land of Dreams*, to serve as the heart of the campaign. The song was merged with visuals that show typical U.S. landmarks (for new travelers) as well as more off-the-beaten-path locales and experiences (for those that perceived America to be hackneyed). The intention according to Brand USA was to produce an anthem that shows America the destination while simultaneously emanating a feeling of freedom and limitless possibilities (Brand USA, 2013a).

In April 2012 Brand USA and JWT unveiled this new marketing campaign, employing a fully integrated marketing strategy, with a mix of 15, 20 and 60 s television spots, combined with digital, billboard and print advertisements along with a robust online presence and social media strategy to reach potential visitors (Eye For Travel, 2013). The new website, DiscoverAmerica.com, acted as a visitors’ information portal for trip planning, and country specific Facebook, Twitter and YouTube pages sought to engage consumers with unique promotions. A media budget of \$12.3 million was allocated for the first three months of the campaign, with advertising starting in the U.K., Japan and Canada, and then spreading to Brazil, South Korea, China, India, Germany, Mexico, India and Australia. In selecting the overseas markets for its targeted campaigns, Brand USA relied on six criteria: annual volume of visitors; total annual tourism revenue; year-over-year growth on travel volume and tourism revenue; cost of buying media in the country; travelers’ ease of entry into the U.S; and infrastructure, including the availability of representative firms and social media in the country (Brand USA, 2013a).

Brand USA also targeted the travel trade. Industry specific pages were set up on both Twitter and Facebook to engage the

trade in customized initiatives, such as the Brand USA Megafam whereby 100 agents from the U.K. and Ireland were brought to the U.S. on a familiarization trip to experience seven different itineraries (Brand USA, 2012). A “Fam Photo Competition” (www.famphotousa.co.uk) was also set up for agents to upload photographs they had taken on recent familiarization trips in the U.S. Travel agents had the option to “like” their favorite photos, encouraging peer-to-peer engagement.

Beyond this integrated marketing strategy, Brand USA also looked towards branded entertainment as an innovative way of reinforcing the new brand values. A new website was launched in London accepting confidential television ideas from producers. An advisory board then met to evaluate the submissions and the potential to create the programs in partnership with the producers. Preference was given to submissions that: encompassed the four experience pillars referred to above; covered multiple destinations; would be broadcast in a number of countries in addition to the U.K; and engaged the viewer beyond television to additional online content. Building on this initiative a new broadcast/production program was launched at the 2014 IPW conference in Chicago. This allowed broadcast and production media from Australia, Canada, U.K. and Ireland to participate in face-to-face appointments with U.S. destinations to find out more about filming in the U.S. Once again, the idea was to encourage producers to feature the U.S. as a premier destination and leverage the new brand promise (Brand USA, 2013b).

In terms of evaluating the brand’s effectiveness, Brand USA is measuring its success based on improvements and increases to two key areas: awareness and image of the U.S. as a travel destination; and travelers’ intent to travel to the U.S. In a preliminary report released in September 2012, Brand USA said that intent to visit climbed 13 points in Canada, 17 points in the U.K., and 11 points in Japan as a result of the initial marketing campaigns. Campaign awareness in launch markets averaged 25 percent. For social media initiatives, Brand USA’s key indicator for success is a formula of total fans and percentage of engagement. The organization also produces monthly social media reports that include information such as the Twitter and Facebook posts that have attracted the most attention. In the first eight weeks of the campaign, the Land of Dreams song was downloaded 20,000 times, 99 percent of social media sentiments were positive, and the Brand USA YouTube channel had received over 500,000 views. Brand USA reported that its website had more than 467,000 page views in June 2013, compared with about 77,000 in April 2012 (GAO, 2013).

Despite these efforts, a 2013 report on Brand USA’s campaign by the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) stated that the metrics and evaluations used by Brand USA were not comprehensive enough, suggesting that they needed to go one step further and measure the campaign’s impact on actual visits and spending (GAO, 2013). The observation was made that the survey results reported by Brand USA were not generalizable and the analysis did not take into account other factors that might have influenced perceptions of the U.S. In response, Brand USA was developing and executing a more sophisticated metrics and evaluation program which will demonstrate the long-term effectiveness of its campaign.

The new branding effort has not escaped criticism since its inception. Two Senators, Jim DeMint and Tom Colburn, issued a blistering report excoriating Brand USA for what it called a history of waste, abuse, patronage and lax oversight (Sullivan, 2013). Others criticized the media strategy itself, arguing that the Land of Dreams anthem tried to show too many destinations at one time, therefore lacking a clear call to action (Vinjamuri, 2012; Ries, 2012). However, any multi-million dollar branding campaign will have its critics; witness Australia, who despite being one of the

first countries to treat a destination as a brand (and successfully so) still attracts controversy every time a new campaign is launched from “Down Under” (Pike, 2012). Overall, the general opinion amongst experts was that the new campaign to sell America to the world was a success (Nudd, 2012; Bloom Consulting, 2012; O’Neill, 2013), and Brand USA has been the recipient of several industry accolades (Brand USA, 2013a).

What was interesting, from an academic point of view, is how Brand USA has adhered to the four-stage conceptual model for building a destination brand. The brand’s current situation was assessed through an examination of international perceptions about the U.S., and from this a new brand identity and promise was created. This promise was then communicated via an integrated marketing campaign targeting potential tourists from all over the world. Although plans were put in place to measure the effectiveness of the campaign, they were perhaps not as robust as they could be. This is not unusual – the evaluation methods used by DMOs have always been subject to criticism (Faulkner, 1997). Perhaps in order to secure the future of Brand USA, the organization needs to do a better job of “touting its success” (Watkins, 2013). The Canadian Tourism Commission, for example, proudly claims a 37:1 return on investment for every dollar spent on overseas marketing (CTC, 2012).

Another interesting observation is the employment of non-traditional marketing tactics to leverage the new brand. Social media is a major part of Brand USA’s marketing strategy, with \$5 million spent on it in 2013 alone, and America is one of the first destinations to launch country-specific social media pages. Brand USA has clearly acknowledged the fact that social media has completely changed how consumers engage with brands (Edelman, 2010). Proponents of the film tourism phenomenon will also be interested to see Brand USA’s efforts to court production and broadcast media. The potential of film tourism is often not fully recognized by DMOs who tend not to exploit the opportunities that exist through the medium of film and television (Bolan & Williams, 2008). This is usually due to budget constraints or the absence of a measurable return on investment. Yet, if leveraged well, film tourism can have large economic gains for countries and regions (Oxford Economics, 2007). So it is encouraging to see Brand USA working with the film industry to facilitate film production, and presumably they will capitalize on the subsequent exposure.

In retrospect, this regional spotlight has offered a good example of destination branding in practice, but only time will tell whether or not Brand USA will achieve its goal of welcoming 100 million visitors to the U.S. by the end of 2020. After a “Lost Decade”, perhaps 2010–2020 will be the decade for the world’s travelers to rediscover America.

References

- Blain, C., Levy, S. E., & Ritchie, B. (2005). Destination branding: Insights and practices from destination management organizations. *Journal of Travel Research*, 43(4), 328–338.
- Bloom Consulting (2012). Country brand ranking, Tourism edition 2012.

- Bolan, P., & Williams, L. (2008). The role of image in service promotion: Focusing on the influence of film on consumer choice within tourism. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 32, 382–390.
- Brand USA (2012). Brand USA announces travel agent Fam photo competition. October 12. Retrieved from: (<http://www.thebrandusa.com/Media/Press-Releases>) accessed 15 November 2013.
- Brand USA (2013a). Brand USA marketing plan. February, Washington DC.
- Brand USA (2013b). US travel association and Brand USA announce inaugural broadcast/production media programme for IPW Chicago. November 4. Retrieved from: (<http://www.thebrandusa.com/Media/Press-Releases>) accessed 2 December 2013.
- CTC. (2012). *Canadian tourism commission annual report 2011. How do you market a country?*. BC: Canadian Tourism Commission: Vancouver.
- Dow, R. (2011). America’s lost decade of tourism. *The Wall Street Journal*, 21 (November).
- Edelman, D. (2010). Branding in the digital age. *Harvard Business Review*, 88(12), 62–69.
- Eye For Travel (2013). Rekindling the love affair: Brand USA on inspiring a new generation to travel. April 18. Retrieved from: (<http://www.eyefortravel.com>) accessed 15 November 2013.
- Faulkner, B. (1997). A model for the evaluation of national tourism destination marketing programs. *Journal of Travel Research*, 35(3), 23–32.
- GAO (2013). Travel promotion. Brand USA needs plans for measuring performance and updated policy on private sector contributions. Report to the ranking Member, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives, July.
- Hudson, S., & Ritchie, J. R. B. (2009). Branding a memorable destination experience. The case of ‘Brand Canada’. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 11(2), 217–228.
- Knapp, D., & Sherwin, G. (2005). *Destination brand science*. DC: Washington: International Association of Convention and Visitor Bureaus.
- MillwardBrown (2009). The business of brands. Collective intelligence for marketing today. Retrieved from: (http://www.millwardbrown.com/Libraries/MB_Published_Books_Downloads/MillwardBrown_TheBusinessOfBrands.sflb.ashx) accessed 25 November 2013.
- Morgan, N., Pritchard, A., & Piggott, R. (2003). Destination branding and the role of the stakeholders: The case of New Zealand. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 9(3), 285–299.
- NTTC (2010). Looking to 2020. The future of travel and tourism in Canada. National Travel and Tourism Coalition. Authored by McPherson Transportation Consultancy.
- Nudd, T. (2012). Ad of the day: Brand USA. Adweek, 25 April. Retrieved from: (<http://www.adweek.com/news/advertising-branding/ad-day-brand-usa-139840>) accessed 5 November 2013.
- Oxford Economics (2007). The economic impact of the UK film industry. Oxford, U.K.
- O’Neill, S. (2013). Brand USA and Air France are the most-discussed travel brands in real-world conversations. *Tnooz*. Retrieved from: (<http://www.tnooz.com>) accessed 25 November 2013.
- Pike, S. (2012). *Destination marketing: An integrated marketing communication approach*. Burlington, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Ries, A. (2012). The most effective way to sell Brand USA’s image. Advertising age, 8 January. Retrieved from: (<http://adage.com/>) accessed 25 November 2013.
- Ritchie, J. R. B., & Ritchie, R. J. B. (1998). The branding of tourism destinations: Past achievements and future challenges. Keynote address, Annual congress of the international association of scientific experts in tourism (AIEST) (pp. 89–116). Marrakesh, Morocco.
- Ritchie, J. R. B., & Crouch, G. I. (2003). *The competitive destination: A sustainable tourism perspective*. Wallingford, U.K: CABI Publishing.
- Sparkloft Media (2011). State of the travel and tourism industry: Social media 2011. Retrieved from: (<http://sparkloftmedia.com/blog/resources/state-of-the-travel-and-tourism-industry-in-social-media-2011/>) accessed 25 January 2012.
- Sullivan, K. (2013). Selling the U.S.A. *The Washington Post*, 10 March, G1 & G5.
- US Travel Association (2011). Ready for take-off: A plan to create 1.3 million US jobs by welcoming millions of international travelers. Washington DC., 12 May.
- Vinjamuri, D. (2012). Why the ‘Brand USA’ campaign misses the mark: It fails the ‘gold box’ test. *Forbes.com*, 25 April. Retrieved from: (<http://forbes.com>) accessed 18 March 2013.
- Watkins, E. (2013). It’s time to rally behind Brand USA. *HotelNewsNow*, 23 July. Retrieved from: (<http://hotelnewsnow.com>) accessed 15 December 2013.
- Zenker, S., & Martin, N. (2003). Measuring success in place marketing and branding. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 7(1), 32–41.