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Strategic Insights On:

Travel, Tourism and Entertainment

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Travel, Tourism and Entertainment

With proven expertise for all facets of travel and tourism in our agency walls, we possess an award-winning, unparalleled combination of superior strategy, skills and personalized service. From RevPAR, OC rates and ADR, to increased visitation and upwards-trending engagement, our unrivaled campaign numbers speak for themselves.

We hope you enjoy this content and evok's commitment to the travel, tourism and entertainment industries. If you would ever like to be a guest writer, or suggest blogs for us to write, please contact us at info@evokad.com.



4 UX-FOCUSED WAYS TO IMPROVE HOTEL WEBSITE BOOKING CONVERSIONS

How to Boost Hotel Website Conversions

Whether your hotel offers luxury getaways or budget-friendly stays, there is one thing all potential guests expect from your website—a secure, seamless and speedy booking experience. Adventure is only a few clicks away, or at least that's what you want visitors to think when they land on your website.

If your goal is to convert clicks to overnight stays, here are four ways to improve your conversion rates and increase hotel bookings.

If You've Got It, Flaunt It

Some of the first places potential guests turn to when picking out a hotel are photo or video galleries. To highlight your hotel's assets, invest in high-quality photography and dynamic video that captures the very best of your property. That being said, you also want to stay true to your hotel's features—don't mislead guests by showing amenities your property doesn't actually offer.

Keep an Eye on Speed

Every one-second delay in page load time reduces conversions by 7 percent. In today's fast-paced world, speed is one of the biggest keys in converting customers and keeping them coming back. Ensuring your site loads quickly, ideally within two to three seconds, means less money potentially left on the table.

Make Mobile a Focus

Across the U.S., hotel bookings on mobile devices shot up by 67 percent in 2016. A mobile-friendly website can help you get a slice of the mobile booking pie while serving potential guests a fast, easy to navigate digital brand experience.

Simplify the User Journey

Overloading your website with too much information will undoubtedly overwhelm your site's users. The most important part of boosting your conversions is ensuring your visitors have a clear path from browsing to booking. Need a crash course on web UI and UX? We've got you covered.

Implementing any of the four steps outlined in this blog can influence a measurable impact on your property's bottom line. But remember, optimizing your hotel's website to boost conversions is not a one-and-done process—it's an ongoing effort.



HOW TO PICK THE RIGHT ADVERTISING AGENCY TO PROMOTE YOUR SUMMER DESTINATION

5 Ways to Find an Agency That Fits with Your Organization

Spring break is in full swing. Students are scattered across your destination and hitting the water, shops and bars. But before you know it, they'll be gone and hitting the books again, and you'll be anxiously awaiting your next visitor wave: summertime vacationers.

Maybe your numbers have been dragging the last few years or maybe this year you want to get those numbers to skyrocket. Either way, hiring an advertising agency to help you get a plan into place will help you ride your next success wave.

With advertising agencies, there are definitely plenty of fish in the sea, and it can be a bit overwhelming to find the one that perfectly fits your organization. But to ease the pressure, we've put together the top five attributes to look for when you're on the search:

Experts in Your Industry

You want someone who can talk the talk and walk the walk. Find an agency that is strong across the board and can apply strategic and creative marketing principles and tactics to any destination.

You also want an agency that possesses a deep understanding of how to engage and motivate all of your travel segments whether it be leisure, group, sports, tour operators, LGBT or multicultural.

Services to Suit Your Needs

After you've found an expert in your industry, look for an agency that offers services that will take your organization to the next evolution.

It's smart to choose a full-service advertising agency. Even though you might not need all the services today, you might need them in the future, and it's easier to weave them into your campaign with an agency who already knows you and your brand.

A Budget That Works For You

You want an agency that delivers qualified and quantifiable results within your budget constraints. Larger agencies tend to charge more than smaller agencies. While you may be drawn to select a big, leading advertising agency, you may only be able to afford one or two of their services. On the flip side, if you go with a smaller agency, you may be able to afford a full-service approach.

Local, National or Even International

Search near and far. With technology, such as video conferencing calls, you don't have to just search for an agency locally, you can look into hiring an agency nationally or even internationally.

An Agency That's Fun

Last but certainly not the least, you want a fun agency. If the agency can't have fun, then how can they have fun with your brand? You want an agency that gives you the opportunity to let tourists experience your brand in a fun way and in the end, forge stronger relationships with your customers, consumers or visitors.

Finding the right agency partner is a journey, but the destination (and yours) is worth the trip. If you're looking for a full-service agency with national and international capabilities, consider evok advertising here in Lake Mary, Florida.



START MARKETING THE TRAVEL EXPERIENCE FROM A LOCAL'S PERSPECTIVE

Travelers Want to Be Fully Immersed in Their Destination's Culture

Data says travelers want authenticity. In fact, 76% of baby boomers and 86% of millennials want to experience a new culture when they travel. As a destination, how do you give travelers a true “when in Rome,” experience?

Give your locals a voice.

Locals know their hometown or city like the back of their hands, making for ideal tour guides. Here's how to tap into your local market to help travelers get your destination's full experience.

Find Local Influencers

Start your search for influencers in your area by combing through popular hashtags for your destination and checking out the top posts. Once you've found a few personalities that match your messaging, reach out to them and see if they're interested in forming a partnership. Don't be shy to write up a formal pitch and tell them why this would be a beneficial opportunity for both sides.

After reaching an agreement, encourage influencers to share their favorite local attractions or restaurants on their social media accounts or website. That content will be amplified by their social followings and can be leveraged on your own platforms as well.

And, you don't have to start from scratch when it comes to sharing stories. Bloggers, influencers and other public figures may already be featuring your destination on their accounts. This Chicago blogger shares her favorite hotels, activities and restaurants in the Windy City on her website. You can take this already published content and share it on your channels, as long as you're attributing it back to its owner.

Feature Local Testimonials

According to a survey by BrightLocal, 88% of consumers trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations. To tap into that percentage, connect with locals and ask them to share their thoughts and opinions on your destination, then feature that content on your website and social media accounts. Local reviews and recommendations for your area can help you create an even stronger bond with an audience who yearns for authenticity.

Hire Local Guides

Take the leap and hire local guides to show your travelers the ins and outs of the city. Partner with services like SANDEMANs or Showaround to show off your destination's best, or start your own, keeping locals at the helm.

As a destination marketing organization, you don't have to search high and low on how to give visitors a taste of your culture and city. The answer may be closer than you realize.



THE MODERN MILLENNIAL TRAVELER HAS LANDED

Millennial Travelers Require a Different Travel Experience

Traditional advertising isn't quite millennials cup of tea when it comes to travel and tourism. An outdoor billboard or a radio spot highlighting your city or town really won't convince them to hop on board and visit your destination.

For these folks, recommendations from their friends and family are what convinces them to book flights and make accommodations. In fact, 84% said their friends' or family's Facebook posts influences them to make or change travel plans. That's quite a large percentage.

So, for this segment, combining nontraditional advertising with user-generated content (UGC) is where the rubber will hit the road. If you're not utilizing UGC, start today. Here's how:

Embrace User-Generated Content

First step: Put down the camera. Stop with the stock photography or staged photos. UGC offers versatility and a possible bank with real photos that would be impossible for a professional photographer to capture. A photographer can't be there for the first time a child catches a fish or that intimate moment at the dinner table with a significant other.

Millennials want to see these real moments. If their friends' or family members' photos are shared across your Facebook, Instagram or Twitter, they'll be even more persuaded to visit.

And the best part, UGC is free—most of the time. You just have to sift through the clutter of images, find the good ones, and ask in written form if you can use the photo. They may just be ecstatic that you're even asking to showcase their photo and let you run with it, or they may happily agree but tack on a fee.

Be Mobile

After you legally acquire your UGC, before you run wild with it, you have to remember to be mobile friendly to these millennial travelers. You can read up and learn everything about millennial tourism trends, travel habits and travel destinations, but it doesn't mean anything if you're not getting down to the nitty-gritty of your online engagement via mobile devices.

A solid 86% of millennials are disappointed by company's mobile experiences. Make sure your app or website looks stellar across all mobile devices—Apple, Android, Google and all the above. Millennials can love and relate to your UGC, but they won't be coming back for seconds if your mobile content isn't user-friendly.

Before you start implementing these tactics, remember today's lesson to take home: Start searching for photos and focus on your mobile content.



HOW MILLENNIALS ARE ALTERING THE TRADITIONAL VACATION PARADIGM

Employers, forget vacations and say hello to staycations. Those darn millennials are at it again. They've killed department stores, the 9-to-5 workday and now they're ready to say farewell to the typical vacation.

By typical vacation we mean the one where you take a week or two off and travel outside of your city to kick back and relax. These days, millennials would rather book a hotel or Airbnb or even stay in their city for vacation and lodge at home—hence, the staycation.

It may seem odd to market and advertise to local residents for your travel and tourism industry, but millennials are ready to pack their bags and stay at home.

What Exactly is a Staycation?

Before you jump the gun and start advertising and marketing staycations to millennials, you must fully understand what exactly a staycation means to them.

Some staycationers sleep at home while others book accommodations. For those who spend the night at home, they like to transform their house into a hotel. This could mean immaculately cleaning their house as if housekeeping stopped by during its rounds, getting food delivered to replicate room service, or converting their basic bathroom into an aromatherapy spa.

When they roam outside of their home, hotel or Airbnb while on staycation, they treat their city like it's uncharted territory. They discover museums, parks or theaters that they otherwise wouldn't have time to soak up and enjoy.

Millennials take about three staycations per year. It's time to start advertising and marketing them.

Three Killer Tactics to Start Advertising Staycations

You don't have to drain your business' bank account or draw up a massive campaign to start advertising and marketing staycations. Instead, here are three simple tips and ideas to get the ball rolling today:

Create locals-only deals

This goes for accommodations, activities, restaurants or anything travel and tourism related. You have to cast the net to catch the fish of local residents. Restaurants, advertise BOGO entrees on a set night for locals. Museums or art galleries, offer free entry on a day of the week. Hotels, offer the first night's stay free. You get the idea—create deals to draw in the locals.

Launch a locals' referral rewards program

Word spreads fast—especially if there's a reward involved. If neighbor 1 refers neighbor 2 to your business, send them a coupon to their inbox or give them a certain amount off their next visit.

Build your social media

Millennials go straight to social media to read reviews and learn about a destination when making plans. So, don't let them hear crickets when they visit your social media page—make sure it's alive and active. Show what's going on at your business and post pictures of local clients with their comments.

Millennials aren't going to go back to vacations any time soon. So, hop on that staycation train now before it's too far out of your sight.



GOING SOCIAL WITH YOUR DESTINATION MARKETING ORGANIZATION

Destination marketing organizations (DMOs), for the most part, are focused on one thing: getting visitors to eat, play, and shop 'til they drop while vacationing. What tends to fall by the wayside, though, is the social aspect of the vacationer experience.

Custom Snapchat filters, promotional Facebook contests and simple word-of-mouth campaigns help to give destinations more longevity than their competitors. So, let's dispense with the online insecurities and discover why becoming a social media master is necessary for success in the modern travel market, shall we?

Show, Don't Tell

The destination your organization promotes has a story worth sharing. In the social media-driven world of today, that story will have the most impact if it's shared visually. Encourage your visitors to post trip photos under a designated hashtag and feature them on your site and social feeds. Don't just tell them that your destination is picturesque. Show them.

In addition, the power of social video is something your DMO cannot overlook. Your future visitors are turning to the Internet over television to be educated and entertained. In fact, more 18-49 year olds watch YouTube than any television network or cable provider. Tell video-savvy visitors to share their testimonials through YouTube or Facebook and share it with their friends and followers. Potential future visitors will be more moved by watching people like them enjoying your destination's breathtaking landscapes, bustling nightlife or adrenaline-filled adventures than reading about it.

Keep Them Coming Back

What's better than gaining a crop of new visitors? Gaining a crop of new visitors that keep coming back. Creating loyalty perks that motivate guests to return and reward those that do has never been easier. Engage your Facebook fans with a timeline promotion—conduct a contest through your page and offer additional entries to users that invite their friends to join your page's following.

You could also develop a loyalty program through social media that rewards users for each like, comment or share that increases your page's post reach and engagement rates. Rewarding socially engaged visitors with discounts on future trips builds a loyal visitor following that's as eager to see your next post as they are to go back to your destination for their next escape.

Track Your Results

You've liked, posted and shared. So how did it go? Like with any other medium your DMO uses to sell your destination, you must set measurable goals and gather empirical evidence to show what worked, what didn't and what needs to change.

The big, wide world of social media can be mildly terrifying. However, its potential positive effects for your DMO are too great to pass up.

Tens of thousands, if not millions, of people rely on you every year to be the go-to resource for their vacation needs, so why not play the part? The positive effects of a well-organized social media effort far outweigh any reticence you may have about using the platform. It's time to roll up your sleeves and get to it. Your visitors will be much more appreciative in the end.

Still have a few unanswered questions regarding the state of your destination marketing efforts? Email us at info@evokad.com or call (407) 585-8231 to learn how evok advertising can help turn your destination into a tourism hotspot.

Receive the latest industry insights from the evok team in your inbox by signing up for the evoker, our monthly newsletter or contact us to explore ways we can partner.



SOCIAL MEDIA: CHANGING THE WAY CONSUMERS TRAVEL

Social media is affecting everything about consumers' travel decisions from researching and planning to posting during a vacation. Travel statistics report that 19 out of 20 travelers are active on Facebook, and over 50% of travelers look to social media before deciding on their next travel destination.

If your brand relies on tourism, your marketing efforts must include social media or you will be left behind.

Travelers

Consumers trust their peers' opinions and recommendations over expert advice, and when it comes to travel, these recommendations often come from social media. Social media also is helping get more people to travel due to the "fear of missing out." If they see their friends travel the world, they want to go, too.

Millennials, the next large generation of travelers, are influenced by social media. They get weather, airline, hotel, and attraction information from sites like Facebook and Instagram. They also look to other sites like TripAdvisor to see what travelers are saying and to see their photos. Consumers are enjoying the freedom to book their own travel and research possible destinations for themselves.

What Can Brands Do?

There are many things that brands can do on social media to keep themselves on the minds of travelers. The most cost-effective thing you can do is encourage your customers to share their experiences, photos, and videos about your destination. You can accomplish this by creating an environment on your website for user generated content. On social media sites, you can create a loyalty program that would give extra bonus points to your current customers for sharing experiences. It is helpful to add a "Buy" button to social media pages to redirect new, recommendation-seeking users to your page to book a reservation.

A review that has been written on a site like TripAdvisor can really affect business. If you get one bad review, it could turn away someone searching for your services forever. In order to prevent this, it is very important to stay on top of what consumers are saying about your business and reply to all comments, both good and bad. Always respond in a positive way—customers are paying attention to your response just as much as (or more than) what the reviewer is saying. You can turn a customer around just by your kind response to a poor review.

By curating positive reviews and encouraging social shares, hospitality brands can leverage social media to build positive brand awareness, increase brand loyalty, and display just how much their accommodations and activities have to offer.

What Others Are Doing

There are several brands that are using social media creatively to attract and keep customers. They are focusing on engaging their customers and keeping their brand at the top of customers' minds.

KLM Royal Dutch Airlines launched a program to wow its guests and to go the extra mile. They found many customers waiting to board their flights and were searching social media while they waited. So, KLM matched their customers' likes through their social media pages and gave them a gift as they boarded the plane that was tailored to them personally. The result was 1,000,000 impressions on Twitter, thanks to many happy customers that told lots of others about their experience.

JetBlue decided not to advertise their services on social media. Rather, they just put their focus on responding to customers. They spent all their efforts responding to both positive and negative comments on social media. They stayed positive in all their responses and solved the problems of their customers. Their focus on customer service kept their customers loyal to the brand and attracted new ones.

Uber changed the way people travel locally. How did they make their brand a household name in such a short time period? They used the power of social media and sharing with friends. Uber allowed consumers to share an Uber referral code, giving their friends a free ride. The consumer would, in turn, get a free ride for themselves. This was genius, and they put in very little investment with huge returns.

Social media is changing the way people travel and marketers need to make the most of it. Keep consumers engaged, stay positive, be responsive, cater to emotions, keep things interesting, and get people talking about your brand.



SOLO TRAVEL: THE FREEDOM TO DO WHAT YOU WANT

After publishing a recent blog about the latest in travel trends, solo travel received many comments and inquiries, so we decided to follow it up with a blog dedicated to solo travel.

Have you dreamed of traveling to an exotic location to relax in the ocean, or visiting France to learn a new language, or perhaps Italy to enjoy magnificent wine? But, without a friend who shares your interests, are you just dreaming? Time is not slowing down, so stop dreaming and start planning your next vacation solo.

Benefits of Traveling Alone

From planning the destination to the adventures and even to the food, when traveling alone, the choices you make are all your own. There is no compromising on going to the beach because your friend doesn't like the sun or skipping the adventures of zip lining through the rainforest because s/he is afraid of heights. Solo travel is a self-indulgent, fun-filled, confidence booster—do it once, and you'll be hooked. Solo travel opens up abundant possibilities for you to experience. The choices are endless.

Solo Travel Ideas

With so many exciting places to go and things to see, your toughest decision will be where to visit first. Here are some best cities in the US, and abroad, that make great destinations for the single traveler:

- Asheville, NC—food, art, beer and touring the Biltmore Estate
- Austin, TX—music, great food and, from March through November, you can see the famous bats under the Ann W Richards bridge
- Boulder, CO—adventure seekers, bike riding, running, hiking and coffee shops
- New York, NY—restaurants on every corner, shopping and attractions, great place for meeting new people and going to museums
- Portland, OR—famous for local businesses to find unique items, friendly shop owners, cafes, coffee shops and lots of free things to do
- San Diego, CA—learn to surf or relax in the sunshine at the beach
- Washington, DC—check out the museums and explore the government buildings and monuments
- Reykjavik, Iceland—very friendly people, no worries about solo dining here, most will be your friend if you go to local cafes, go out and talk to the people, adventures and day trips all around the country

- Paris, France—bistros, cafes, explore the culture and window shop, meet at the Cafe de Flore and Deux Magots for tours of the city with other solo travelers
- Bali, Indonesia—yoga, spirituality, spas, massages and beaches, many solo travelers here to meet new people and very economical
- Seville, Spain—architecture, ceramics, bullfighting, charming city and a great place to practice photography
- Dublin, Ireland—pubs, castles, beautiful countryside
- Kenya, Africa—animal safari tours, the great animal migration happens June through October

How to Keep It Safe

Safety is a concern when traveling alone so keep these tips in mind to stay safe on your next vacation.

- Stay connected—The most important thing you can do is make sure your phone works where you will be traveling, and if it does not, rent a phone once you arrive. If you can have GPS on the phone, it is a big plus so you can get around easily without calling attention to yourself, as walking around with a large map can quickly draw attention to you being a tourist. Let others know your itinerary and check in daily with a friend or family member.
- Keep your passport, cash, ID and credit cards all in separate areas—If someone steals your purse they will not get away with everything you have. When walking about, carry a copy of your passport and leave original in the safe within your hotel room.
- Study your destination—Get to know their customs. Do you tip your waiter? Shake hands when meeting someone? Count your change in public? Make sure you know the emergency numbers of the city you are in and program them into your phone. Do not let someone take advantage of you because you did not research—look at average cab fares from the airport to your hotel and if they try to charge you more, get a different cab.
- Always ask for a high floor and a room close to the activity or action of the hotel—Don't be in a secluded part of the hotel if traveling alone and keep your doors locked always. When choosing a hotel, stay at hotels that are open 24 hours a day, so there will always be someone at the front no matter what time you arrive or leave. It is also good to let the front desk know when you might return.
- Be aware of new connections—If you meet someone new, be careful, stay in public areas with them, don't let them know where you are staying and don't be afraid to tell someone when/if you're ready to go back to traveling solo.

Solo Travel Tips

When you are out and about exploring the town, don't be afraid to meet new people. In fact, talk to as many people as you can and learn all about the culture and local hot spots—locals can tell you of places to visit you may never have heard of otherwise. For the truly adventurous, check out Hospitality Club and/or Couch Surfing.

And, while you're online, remember social media. It's a great way to reach out to friends of friends of friends that live in the town you are going to visit—most people would be thrilled to be your tour guide or have a meal with you. You can also use social media to connect with local interest groups like the local golf club or paddle boarding club—more than likely, these members would love to have you join them for their activities.

Check with the concierge at your hotel; the best ones can always recommend a good local tour or guide to show you the city.

The best thing you can do is know your interests and find a city that offers an abundance of them, from snowboarding, kayaking, crafting and antiquing, to cooking, wine or art. Remember, if you're afraid to go out alone in the evening, start your day early with a hike or outdoor activity. If you like the nightlife, check out the theater or a local pub for a beer and live music. Lastly, don't forget to bring a good book for any down time you might have.

The best thing about solo travel is the freedom to do what you want, when you want. Try it; you just might love it.



2017 TOP TRAVEL TRENDS: STAYCATIONS, WELLNESS, SOLO TRAVEL AND MORE

What does modern-day travel look like? Not long ago, the answer to that question would have involved mentions of travel agents, guide-led tours and annual visits to distant family members. While each of those factors still play a role in how people choose, plan and book vacations today, 2017 has brought a noticeable shift in worldwide travel trends. Here's a deeper look at some of those trends and how they've changed how many of us look at and experience travel. While the concept of blending business and personal travel is not brand new, "bleisure" travel has grown in popularity in recent years. In today's culture-first work environments, organizations are consistently seeking new benefits or perks to offer their employees to make themselves attractive to prospective new hires, while working hard to retain the team in place.

Providing staff, the flexibility and freedom to bring their families with them when traveling on business is a hot trend in both travel and employee benefits packages. With the employer covering the cost of the employee's travel, the family's overall vacation cost can be significantly reduced.

Many corporations are also including Airbnb as an option in addition to traditional hotels, so families can enjoy more space at an affordable rate, often subsidized by the employer. In fact, many individuals and families are opting for alternative accommodations, like Airbnb, over hotels in general, with more than one million guests staying in Airbnb listings around the world on most nights. Staycations Modern travelers have discovered that you don't have to go far for an unforgettable vacation. Many travelers are finding that staying close to home and exploring their local region can be just as exciting as traveling abroad.

Staycations

Staycations can also come with less stress, hassle and expense, and when your vacation days are numbered, a staycation can be a great option that doesn't require additional time allotted for flying or driving to your destination. Staycations have become particularly popular amongst Millennials. This group tends to travel more than other segments, but typically does so on a smaller budget. And, with a tendency to embrace unique experiences and adventure over traditional vacation activities, many Millennials find some of the best adventures can take place in their own hometown or within an hour's drive.

Solo Travel

Social media allows people to stay connected, which can provide a feeling of security—you are never truly alone.

Looking at Google Search trends, the number of searches for the terms "solo travel" and "travel alone" hit a peak in the first week of January 2017, 25 percent higher than the same period last year, and it's continuing to rise. Particularly on the rise is women traveling alone, not for nightlife or shopping, but rather to explore a destination on their own or learn a new skill. Dr. Carol Logan, Central Florida's premier boutique optometrist, often does both, honing her photography skills, a new hobby, while enjoying some of the most picturesque destinations in the world. "Traveling alone frees the ties of being strapped to a schedule and allows me to experience the world with spontaneity," says Logan. "Having the ability to change paths at any given moment seems to take me to some place and time that will be fondly remembered and offers the chance encounter of meeting someone who will never be forgotten. Afterwards, there is always a fascinating story to tell."

Ecotourism

Ecotourism as a concept means making as little of an impact as possible on a destination—take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints. Today's travelers are choosing to respect and protect the environment and culture of their chosen destinations, and consistently look for more sustainable travel options. From opting for outdoor activities that get them closer to nature, to demanding hotels be more environmentally conscious, travelers' desire to connect with their surroundings while protecting natural resources has created a massive new segment within the travel industry. In response to these demands, many destinations have begun offering packages with adventures paired with hotels that respect the environment. Hotels are putting in policies to reduce their carbon footprint by recycling, growing their own food, reducing water consumption and doing business with environmentally responsible companies.

The United Nations has even declared 2017 as the International Year for Sustainable Travel Development.

Wellness and Medical Tourism

Wellness destinations have become highly sought after for travelers seeking a rejuvenating experience as part of their vacation plans. Beyond simply offering spa packages, many destinations have placed a focus on overall wellness and self-improvement in efforts to appeal to this rapidly growing group of travelers. Discover the Palm Beaches (the official tourism marketing corporation for Palm Beach County, FL) has designated October as its first Spa & Wellness Month, and the Saint Lucia Tourist Board has declared November as the inaugural Adventure and Wellness Month. These destinations are catering to health-conscious travelers by offering exercise/fitness activities and outdoor adventures, as well as inner wellness activities like yoga, massages and spa days. In addition, the high cost of medical care in the US has created an increase in people traveling for medical treatment. By some estimates, US citizens can save up to 90 percent on their procedures by traveling to another country to obtain treatment. Especially popular is traveling to get elective medical treatment, such as plastic surgery or a cosmetic procedure. Travelers are also seeking out exotic locations for medical services not yet offered in the United States. And, as medical costs continue to rise in the West, so too will the number of people turning a medical procedure into an international vacation.

Technology

Prior to the Internet, one of the only ways to book your travel was to use a travel agent. In a recent survey of travelers, just 6.25 percent of people say they will use a travel agent in 2017. With information just a mouse click away, prospective travelers can research and book their own vacations in an instant. And, with access to virtual tours, drone photos to view locations and countless consumer reviews, travelers have never been more knowledgeable about booking trips online. Many travel apps even allow the booking of hotels and flights via smartphones just hours prior to a departure, providing travelers last-minute discounts when they bundle services like air, hotel and rental car. The ease of booking travel makes it easy for travelers to get what they want, when they want it and at a price that can often increase the number of days of a vacation, or even the number of trips per year. Travel search engines have also grown smarter in recent years, storing your travel preferences and recommending things that should meet your needs when you book your next trip. In many cases, it can be like having a virtual travel agent. The reasons why we travel may have changed, but one thing is certain — exploring new cities, countries and cultures will remain a cherished way to spend time with loved ones or getting to know yourself a bit better, in 2017 and beyond.



HOW CAN A ‘SMALLER’ DESTINATION COMPETE FOR TOURISM?

According to The State of American Vacation 2017, Americans are beginning to use more vacation time, and the trend is projected to continue. For growing travel destinations, this presents opportunity, but a considerable amount of the industry share lies in large cities such as Orlando, Las Vegas, Los Angeles and New York City that are popular travel destinations for people around the world.

When Your Destination Is Overshadowed by the Publicity of Larger Nearby Vacation Hotspots, How Can You Make It Stand Out and Attract Visitors?

The key to marketing a smaller destination is to first identify the unique selling points of that location. This is the combination of the location, activities, and experiences that travelers have at your destination that make their trip unique. If you can take the website copy for your destination and insert the name of another nearby destination instead—then your marketing strategy needs work. Generic travel marketing phrases such as “Discover Many Things to See and Do” and “A Historic Downtown with a Vibrant Atmosphere” are too vague and can apply to almost anywhere. Answer this question first and foremost: What experiences do you offer that visitors cannot have anywhere else?

Making Your Destination Stand Out

A great example is the city of Lindstrom, Minnesota. This small town realized that it had a distinctive Swedish culture and history and started marketing itself as “America’s Little Sweden.” With local bakeries selling Scandinavian donuts and Swedish rye bread and Sven’s Clogs selling wooden shoes, this unique take on tourism put Lindstrom on the map. It even made international headlines when the town requested the umlauts to be included on their state roadway signs. (Lindström vs. Lindstrom). Another example is Seminole County, Florida where a 15-field sports complex was recently constructed, designed to attract youth sports tournament play. Parents will spend more than \$7 billion this year on traveling related to their children’s sports—often staying a day or two before or after the tournament to turn the trip into a family vacation. This is an example of a smaller destination that can market itself as an attractive place to head for youth sports tourism.

What Does Your Spot Have to Offer?

What if the answer lies in what the destination isn’t? Taking Seminole County as an example again—one of the advantages of staying here is that you will be close to the most famous Orlando attractions but the hotels will be more affordable and the restaurants less crowded. The charm of smaller destinations is going to come from the unique local economy. Mom and Pop restaurants, local breweries, Bed and Breakfasts and boutique shops will attract visitors wanting to experience something other than national chains or large commercial brands while still being close enough in proximity to have the choice to experience both. Destinations such as Seminole County can be the ideal alternative family vacation, a peaceful spot between the theme parks and the beaches with other great kid-friendly attractions nearby such as the Central Florida Zoo & Botanical Gardens and ZOOm Air Adventure Park. Perhaps even focusing on their unspoiled ecotourism transforms the area to become relevant to travelers looking for outdoor adventures like hiking, kayaking, fishing and boating.

Reaching Visitors Before They Arrive

As Mark Rybchuk, Corporate Account Executive at Hootsuite, explains in this article, visitors don't just arrive out of the blue one day and then disappear two weeks later. They are spending a considerable amount of time online researching before their trip. Build a relationship with these visitors before they arrive so they feel comfortable navigating the destination. This could include creating a campaign offering valuable information about what to do, where to stay, how to get around, etc. You can be a valuable resource to help them plan their trip weeks or even months before they arrive, whether they are in the Daydream stage or the Practical Planning stage of booking tickets and arranging accommodation.

Highlighting Those Points to the Right Audience

The next step is to highlight these experiences to the ideal audience of potential visitors. The right audience will be the people who are interested in what you have to offer. They won't just want a typical vacation; they will have a particular reason for visiting your destination above all others. In order to attract more of the visitors you want, it is important to understand the emotional reasoning and preferences of the type of person who represents your ideal customer. It is helpful to sit down with your team and think about how you would describe the persona of this customer—How old are they? Do they have kids? What is their income? What hobbies do they enjoy? How do they like to travel? When you've targeted your ideal visitor, you'll know because they love everything that your destination has to offer and will become a brand advocate for you—sharing their positive experiences on social media and telling their friends about what a great trip they had. If you discover you have more than one target market, that's okay. In this case, chances are you have more than one unique selling point, so just distinguish between them when targeting your audience. Remember that you are not selling your destination to tourists—you are selling the experience they will have while they are there. Put yourself in their shoes: what will make them fall in love and want to come back again and again?