ADVOCACY

It's Not Just For A Crisis

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Executive Summary

Destination marketing funding is being challenged throughout the tourism world on a daily basis. There is a general lack of knowledge and understanding of the importance of tourism. DMOs must be active advocates for the work of their organization and the power of tourism’s economic impact on their local economy. They can not expect support from stakeholders if stakeholders don’t know they exist or how the DMO contributes to stakeholder success. Every DMO should have an effective advocacy plan that identifies all stakeholders, outlines effective messaging and indicates appropriate delivery channels. A strategic advocacy plan won’t ensure a crisis will not occur, but it will put the DMO in a position to respond quickly and effectively to mitigate undesirable outcomes.
Introduction

There is a lack of understanding and appreciation for the work of DMOs. The state of Washington recently eliminated its Department of Tourism. DMO marketing budgets are under attack and DMO relevance and value are being questioned. David Hall, a global consultant, is convinced the lack of appreciation comes from the interpretation of the word tourism. He says tourism in many people's minds means relaxation, leisure time and having fun. That is why in tough economic times, tourism is something that can be cut. It isn't viewed as an essential industry such as manufacturing, mining, agriculture or construction.

Tourism must become synonymous with economic development and tax generation. Advocacy needs to be an important activity of the DMO. CEOs are finding that is taking up a higher percentage of their time every year. It is time well invested if it limits or prevents attacks on DMO marketing budgets and develops an appreciation throughout the community for DMO work and tourism-generated tax revenue for local government.

DMOs have a great story to tell that includes being an essential part of a destination's economic engine, a tax generator, a creator and supporter of tourism attractions used by local residents, a supporter of business and creator and supporter of the community's brand. Telling the DMO story is best done through an organized, well thought-out advocacy plan. The messaging should be clear and concise and can be delivered to stakeholders through a variety of delivery channels. Although the CEO should oversee the development and execution of the plan, the responsibility of advocacy should include the DMO staff, management, board and select stakeholders.
Advocacy: It’s Not Just For A Crisis

The 2008 Futures Study was commissioned by Destination Marketing Association International and was conducted by Karl Albrecht International. The study looks at trends and industry developments that will effect destination marketing organizations in the future, regardless of size or geographic location. Three overriding themes surfaced and remained prevalent throughout; Relevance, The Value Proposition and Visibility.

The travel marketplace is ever evolving and the number of travel vendors continues to grow. As the market gets increasingly crowded with free online travel information, the role of the DMO becomes less and less clear. This can lead to a diminished willingness to recognize the DMO as the “official” destination marketing organization for a community. CEOs are identifying “relevance” as a growing pressure they face on a day-to-day basis.

Similar to relevance is the issue of the value proposition. The increasing number of players in the marketplace are offering a growing number of services, many of which the DMO has been offering for years. The service suppliers are now reaching out directly to the customer rather than working through the DMO. It is imperative the DMO, through strategic planning and conversation, maintain its focus on the contributions it provides its community. Clarifying and understanding the DMO’s value proposition will provide a compelling and convincing argument for maintaining the DMO mission for stakeholders, particularly local government.

The enormous increase in available online content has also made visibility a challenge for DMOs. Destination Marketing Association International (DMAI) has done research that has indicated that consumers know very little about CVBs and do not typically seek them out. The level of sophistication and user-friendly design of competing information sources has put the DMO in a position of being by passed by many consumers which, again, calls the DMOs
relevance and value into question. DMOs must position themselves as a critical part of the tourism information highway and remain visible to consumers.

The 2008 Futures Study also identifies eight super-trends; Proliferating Preferences, The Battle for Attention, Dodging Asteroids, Smart and Friendly Websites, The Electronic Society, The Quest for Relevance, Mixed Signals From Government and Going Green. The Quest for Relevance indicates the marketing funds that have traditionally been designated for DMO marketing are under scrutiny by local government and are under attack by other groups making the case for a share of the dollars based on their value and relevance.

In his May 4, 2011 blog, The Relevancy of DMOs, Bill Geist suggests there are three possible reasons for someone to question a DMO’s relevancy: “the DMO hasn’t done a good job of communicating it’s value to the community, the person making the comment has never experienced the DMO’s work on behalf of the community or the person isn’t very bright.” Geist suggests that the first reason lies firmly on the back of the DMO and could include an entitlement mentality. It is directly related to the issue of relevancy, the value proposition and visibility. As far as “not experiencing the DMO’s work,” Geist encourages his DMO clients to get involved in their communities by participating in spring clean-ups or charitable causes which are great opportunities to also share the DMO story. Collaborative partnerships and relationships between the DMO and its community are crucial for sustainable destination marketing (Gartell, 1994). Stakeholders without a clear understanding of the DMO mission will have varying images and expectations of the DMO, some of which the DMO will not be able to deliver.

DMOs are vulnerable to even the smallest of challenges if they neglect to build arguments that support their industry. Messages need to be crafted and delivered efficiently and effectively with data to back them up. The continuing impact of the financial crisis on local governments
has many officials intensifying their scrutiny over how local taxes are spent. Government debt continues to play a role in how budgets, taxes and appropriations are determined. Competition is growing for dollars that have traditionally gone to DMOs without much question. They are facing a growing need to advocate for their future on a number of levels. Local governments are making decisions regarding taxation, infrastructure, transportation and immigration which are all important to the DMO. According to a June 7, 2011 article in USAE (Trager, 2011), funding for the Greater Birmingham CVB could be in jeopardy as the Alabama legislature debates removing the earmarks from the Jefferson County hotel/motel tax that is currently directed to the CVB. Similar legislation has been discussed in other states as a way to help solve local government budget issues.

The Minnesota state legislature considered drafting legislation in 2010 that would have allowed local taxing authorities to use room tax dollars to balance their general revenue budgets for up to two years. According to Julie Wearn, executive director of the Roseville Convention and Visitors Bureau and past chair of the Minnesota Association of Convention and Visitors Bureaus, the hospitality industry needed to react quickly to the attack on DMO funding. “When word spread that this legislation was being drafted, we needed to unite the industry and rally at the capitol in a very short amount of time. We faced a number of challenges given MACVB did not have an advocacy plan in place,” shared Wearn. “We were reacting to a crisis situation.”

It can take years of educating stakeholders and politicians and building alliances to actually influence perceptions, realize change and protect funding. That is why DMOs need to be active participants in advocacy before they face a crisis.

DMOs have many important advocacy messages to communicate; 1) they are an essential element in the economic engine of a destination, 2) they are a major tax generator which brings
new money into local economy, 3) they create and support infrastructure for visitors that is used by local residents throughout the year, 4) they are critical to the success of other businesses, and 5) they play an important role in creating an effective brand for a destination (Rickard, 2011). But, DMOs are not going to get a whole lot of support from local government if they don’t know DMOs exist and they are not going to know about DMOs if they maintain a low profile. DMOs need to clearly communicate what they do in order to build support and avoid challenges to their funding, government regulations and policies. When key stakeholders understand the benefits visitors bring to a destination, local government and stakeholders are more likely to support their local DMO.

Developing an advocacy plan is essential and it begins with identifying key influencers in your destination and then developing a “touch list” according to Bill Geist in his book, Destination Leadership for Boards (2004). The touch list is a list of direct and indirect stakeholders. Direct stakeholders often include: industry associations (e.g., hotel, restaurant, retail); political bodies and funders (e.g., city, county, state); DMO customers (e.g., tour operators, meeting planners, association executives); members – if membership DMO (e.g., taxi, hotel, bus companies, local tourism); other DMOs in the surrounding geographic market; community opinion-makers (e.g., chambers of commerce, EDCs); media; industry employees (unions); travel trade members (e.g., tour operators, travel agents); and convention and meeting planners according to Ford and Peeper (2008). Indirect stakeholders include: customers of DMO stakeholders (e.g., convention and meeting attendees, tour operator customers, and hotel guests); community competitors for resources; community non-competitors for resources; support industries/professionals (e.g., lawyers, real estate agents, educators); civic organizations;
homeowners associations; suppliers to industry members and other political bodies (e.g., airport or port authority) also according to Ford and Peeper (2008).

After the DMO stakeholders have been identified, they should be ranked based on their ability to influence DMO resources both in a favorable or unfavorable way. A strategy for how to work with both lists then needs to be developed. It is important to realize that it is essential for the DMO CEO to spend at least as much time with stakeholders that are unsupportive as it is those that are supportive. Less successful CEOs spend more of their time on stakeholders they hear from most often rather than those they should be talking to on a regular basis. Successful CEOs proactively manage stakeholder relationships. It is better to know and enjoy your friends and manage your foes carefully.

Ford et al. (2008) offers a few strategies for managing difficult stakeholders: 1) communicate the effectiveness of the DMO's performance in objective and unimpeachable ways, 2) discuss how the DMO mission relates to the stakeholder's mission, 3) seek stakeholder input and advice regarding DMO mission and strategy, 4) seek assistance from DMO champions to influence those stakeholders, 5) Seek ways to show mutuality/commonality of interests (win-wins), 6) include stakeholders in activities and events, and 7) show public respect for stakeholder mission and value. These strategies may be built into the DMO advocacy plan.

Advocacy is an attempt to persuade or convince. When building an advocacy plan it is important to ask three very crucial questions: 1) Who are you trying to convince (audience)? 2) What are you trying to convince them of (goal)? 3) How are you going to convince them (messages and delivery channels)? (Faulkner 2004). The main elements of an advocacy plan should include goals, target audiences, message points, delivery channels, tactics and materials and outcome measures (Rickard, 2011). Developing an advocacy plan will assist management,
board and staff in reaching an agreement on key issues and will help define goals, audiences, messages, delivery channels, tactics and measurements.

Clearly, DMOs work with a very diverse audience with multiple interests. Identifying and analyzing the issues important to each audience and how these issues may change in the future will be imperative to understanding how to address critical issues and build relationships. It is important to align and collaborate with other organizations with similar interests. Forming coalitions with stakeholders with diverse backgrounds and interests establishes the broad range of interests that tourism touches (Park, Lehto and Morrison, 2008).

It is important to recognize issues or topics that will be of interest to stakeholders and make certain the DMO is prepared to respond. It is also important to know who should respond (e.g. the CEO, board chair, DMO champion). The following categories should be considered: relevance and value, geo/political issues, natural and man-made disasters, financial (budget/revenue transparency), justifying travel and entertainment spend, salary disclosures, product development, infrastructure, education, economic development, funding and funding models, convention center (costs and management), social responsibility, environmental, quality of life (all the things the industry does for the community) and outside competitive factors (OTA’s, third parties) (Rickard 2011). All of these categories will be prioritized differently by each DMO, but each should be discussed and considered.

“As a first year CEO, advocacy has been one of my priorities and consumes a minimum of forty percent of my time,” says Rob DeCleene, CDME, executive director of Visit South Bend Mishawaka. “It’s played a central role in my first year in South Bend and continues to be an essential aspect of my job. I became the fourth executive director in South Bend in four years. As such, there was much credibility to establish – both personally and organizationally. I spent
my first several months on the job literally meeting with anyone and everyone I possibly could and communicated the benefits of the CVB and my commitment to the position and community. I will be developing a more formal advocacy plan with my board very soon.”
Conclusions

It is abundantly clear that DMOs must be active advocates for the tourism industry and their organizations. It is the responsibility of the CEO to oversee industry and organizational advocacy which should include active participation at every level; staff, management, board and stakeholders.

DMOs answer to a vast array of stakeholders. It is imperative that stakeholders are identified, prioritized and that a plan be put in place to communicate with them on a regular basis which can most easily be done by building an advocacy plan.

The first, and perhaps the most important, step of advocacy is identifying stakeholders or key influencers. They can be placed in two primary categories direct and indirect. Direct stakeholders include those the DMO most closely serves such as industry associations, local government and convention, sports and tour planners. Indirect stakeholders are those that are served by direct stakeholders such as convention attendees and tour passengers. Advocacy plans must focus on direct stakeholders, but should include objectives to serve indirect stakeholders as well. Development of the DMO’s stakeholders list should include input and participation by staff, management and board members. Once the list is identified it should be prioritized in order of those that have the most influence. The “touch list” (Geist, 2004) should then be reviewed to single out the DMO “champions” and “foes.” Often times, champions just require effective, regular communication where as foes will require specific strategy to convert them to champions or, at a minimum, neutralize their negativity.

Once stakeholders have been identified, specific messaging should be developed. It is incorrect to assume the same message will resonate with all stakeholders. Each stakeholder will want to know how the activities of the DMO will affect (benefit) them. The messages should be
simple and concise making it easy for the stakeholder to understand and relate how the DMO contributes toward their success. For local and state government, the DMO is a tax generator that brings new dollars into the economy and reduces the tax burden on politicians’ constituents. For industry partners, the DMO provides promotion and connects their businesses with visitors bringing their vacation dollars into the community. For residents, the DMO generates tax revenue from non-residents which, in turn, reduces the local tax burden. The messages should be engaging and state how the stakeholder will benefit.

Perhaps the most enjoyable part of building a strong advocacy plan is developing the delivery channels. Each set of stakeholders should have their own message and strategy. The way the message is delivered can be varied as well. There are a plethora of delivery channels available such as social media, electronic newsletters, Internet, multi-media (DVDs, PowerPoint, etc.), printed collateral and in-person presentations and networking to name only a few.
Seattle’s CVB launched an advocacy campaign on behalf of the tourism industry in Washington that centered on the theme, “Why Tourism Matters.” The campaign includes the typical economic impact information, but also includes local iconic “Tourism Ambassadors” that attach a face to tourism. The ambassadors are used in local advertising campaigns and at local functions. They also encourage tourism industry members and friends to sign up to receive emails that include action alerts and e-news blasts. Similar advocacy strategies are used by Pennsylvania tourism incorporating a theme of “PA tourism = jobs.” A dedicated website is an excellent place to “store” the primary delivery tools used to communicate messages to stakeholders.

After identifying stakeholders, authoring strategic customized messages and developing delivery channels, the advocacy plan can be put together. It can be built around each set of stakeholders. Write up to three objectives for each stakeholder group with clear and measurable goals. Strategies can then be developed for each objective to attain each goal.

An effective advocacy plan will build relationships with stakeholders that are anchored in respect and trust. It will plan an important part in making certain the DMO has and maintains a “seat at the community table.” An advocacy plan will not provide a one hundred percent guarantee a crisis will not occur. It will ensure the DMO is prepared to address anything that comes along and can do it efficiently and effectively.
References


