

APPEALING TO TOURISTS VIA BRANDED ENTERTAINMENT. FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

**RUNNING HEAD: APPEALING TO TOURISTS VIA BRANDED
ENTERTAINMENT.**

ABSTRACT

Although tourism marketers have not traditionally incorporated branded entertainment into their marketing mix, they are beginning to employ the strategy to attract tourists through the mediums of film, television and the Internet. This paper takes a closer look at the use of branded entertainment by destinations, using the ‘Brand USA’ campaign as a case study. Brand USA used three media platforms to promote the country to tourists, partnering with producers of television, film and digital content to present engaging stories that would appeal to tourists internationally. The case study method serves to identify the critical success factors necessary for effective branded entertainment, an area that has received very little attention in the tourism literature.

KEYWORDS.

Branded entertainment, destination marketing, advertising, branding

INTRODUCTION

Branded entertainment is a relatively new term to describe a more contemporary, sophisticated use of product placement, and has been defined as “*the integration of advertising into entertainment content, whereby brands are embedded into storylines of a film, television program, or other entertainment medium*” (Hudson & Hudson, 2006, p. 492). The term itself has been widely used by the advertising industry for some time, but

it is only in recent years that academic literature on the subject has begun to emerge (Grainge, 2012; Hang, 2014; Horrigan, 2009; Lehu, 2007; Pearlman, Guglielmetti & Listfield, 2014; Um & Kim, 2014; Zhang, Sung & Lee, 2010). Branded entertainment usually involves co-creation and collaboration between entertainment, media and brands (Grainge, 2012). Examples of brands creating entertainment are Coca-Cola, BMW, and Ford, who have all adopted the role of program producer. Specialist agencies like 1st Approach in Hollywood have been set up to assist advertisers in creating their own media productions, and others like The WB have created special programs through which advertisers can pick a scripted show and become the exclusive product-integration partner of that show. The growth of this communications technique is in part due to increasing anxieties about the effectiveness of traditional spot advertising (Donaton, 2004).

In the area of tourism marketing, industry practitioners have primarily focused on the traditional use of product placement to reach target markets. Destinations, too, concentrate on product placement as an opportunity to gain exposure, aware that placing a destination in a film or television is the ultimate in tourism product placement (Morgan & Pritchard, 1998). Although tourism marketers have not traditionally incorporated an integrated branded entertainment approach, there are signs that some tourism organizations are moving away from traditional product placement, to strategic branded entertainment in order to attract tourists through the medium of film and television. A good example of a recent branded entertainment initiative comes from Las Vegas, where it was no accident that the MGM's Aria Hotel played a central role in the 2013 movie *Last Vegas*. MGM strategically 'engineered' the movie to take place in their new hotel, a marketing ploy that benefited both the Aria and the film directors, who both wanted to showcase the 'New Vegas', where the architecture had to feel hip, upscale and beyond the expectations of the four main characters in the movie, played by Robert DeNiro, Michael Douglas, Morgan Freeman and Kevin Kline (Mlife, 2013). Director John Turtletaub said: "We wouldn't have shot in Vegas unless we could have made the kind of arrangement we made with MGM Resorts. We needed so much. And the movie really needs to turn Vegas into a character. Without the kind of access we got, it would have been impossible to do that" (Garrett, 2013).

This paper takes a closer look at the use of branded entertainment by destinations, using the ‘Brand USA’ campaign as a case study. The paper is structured as follows. The first section discusses theory of branded entertainment and how it differs from more traditional product placement. The second section looks at branded entertainment and tourism marketing. A case study on three branded entertainment initiatives by Brand USA is then presented followed by a discussion section. The objective of the paper is not to provide an exhaustive review of the tourism marketing literature; rather, to use a case study methodology to provide valuable insight for both academics and practitioners into the process of promoting a destination via branded entertainment. The case study method also serves to identify the critical success factors necessary for effective branded entertainment, an area that has received very little attention in the tourism literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to a recent survey by the Custom Content Council, branded entertainment is a \$44 billion business, with the pace of change and innovation accelerating (Qu, 2013). It has been suggested that the rise of branded entertainment within contemporary media culture marks a fundamental shift from intrusive advertising pushed at uninterested audiences, to advertising of such merit that the audience actively seeks it out (Lotz, 2007). Rather than focusing on a sales-driven message, key to the short-term economic metrics of conventional advertising, branded entertainment has the ability to build long-term relationships with consumers, deepening brand loyalty among targeted groups (Grainge, 2012). Successful branded entertainment does not mean infusing important product messages with appealing images. It is more about connecting and developing an emotional appeal (Pearlman et al., 2014).

Um and Kim (2014) suggest that the persuasion knowledge model can help understand the effectiveness of branded entertainment in building such loyalty. The basic idea of the model is that a consumer is able to use his or her persuasion knowledge to identify that an agent is attempting to influence him or her. Consumers’ persuasion knowledge enables them to recognize, analyze, interpret, evaluate, and remember

persuasion attempts, and this knowledge helps them choose and execute coping tactics. Branded entertainment is a relative new communications technique so is therefore able to evade this persuasion knowledge. According to Um and Kim consumers have not yet evolved ways of coping with this hidden persuasive message, so branded entertainment flies under the radar of consumers' persuasion knowledge.

There has been a fair amount of literature on the theory of product placement, but there are subtle differences between product placement and branded entertainment. These differences can be illustrated by way of a continuum that expresses the level of brand integration with the storyline or plot (see Figure 1). At one end of the continuum with no brand integration, there is passive product placement, such as the prominent depiction of the Coca Cola name in the program American Idol. Such placements are less effective than other types of placement (Gupta & Lord, 1998). At the other end of the continuum, the product is integrated into the storyline for the program or film, a strategy that can be much more effective (Friedman, 2003). An episode of the CTC drama The Eleventh Hour, for example, featured Nicorettes woven into a story about a character trying to stop smoking. Making brands intrinsic elements of plot lines like this, distinguishes branded entertainment from the traditional use of product placement. In the past, advertisers sought to place products in shows as soon as they became hits. Now, advertising deals are happening alongside the creative development. Programming sponsored by and produced for single advertisers offers them benefits like exclusivity, reduced clutter and the ability to incorporate products into scenes in ways that do not seem blatant or contrived (Elliott, 2006).

INSERT Figure 1. Product placement/branded entertainment continuum (adapted from Hudson & Hudson, 2006, p. 494)

The theoretical model suggests that there are certain key factors that influence the effectiveness of branded entertainment. The first is the media used, and although branded entertainment can be distributed through traditional media, it is now particularly prevalent through the internet (Zhang, Sung, & Lee, 2010). The differences among the types of media must be considered. For example, the advantages of brand placement in video

games over other media include its capacity to increase involvement due to the reception context (active versus passive), its ability to target specific consumer markets, and its longer shelf-life (Nelson, 2002). But for an advertiser trying to reach an international market, films may be the best option. A typical movie with international distribution can now reach over one hundred million consumers as it moves from box office, to video/DVD to TV. Advertisers with more tactical objectives prefer television, as it offers a variety of options.

A second major influence is the brand characteristics, with not all brands lending themselves equally to branded entertainment (Zhang et al., 2010). Many traditional business-to-business marketers express little interest in brand placement in TV or films, whereas fast-moving-consumer-good manufacturers like Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Procter & Gamble, Nike Inc. and Motorola Inc. are much more active. It has also been suggested that brand placement will be more effective for established brand names that are easily identifiable (Ephron, 2003), and for brands that have a unique personality (Um & Kim, 2014).

The level of supporting promotional activity will also influence the success of a branded entertainment campaign (Lehu, 2007). It is now common for companies to put significant advertising and promotional weight behind brand placements. Tie-in operations rest on contracts allowing an advertiser to make reference to a film or television show in which its brands or products are placed. Partnerships between production and advertiser contribute to the relative increase in production costs, whereas for the advertiser, it can prolong the effect of the placement outside the film or show, and even sometimes allow an identification that would otherwise gone unnoticed (Lehu, 2007). Successful joint placement and marketing campaigns include the James Bond launch of BMW's Z3 in the Bond films, Jeep's support of the movie Sahara, and Mattel's partnership with the Cartoon Network.

Consumer attitudes to branded entertainment are also worthy of consideration. Limited research exists pertaining to branded entertainment specifically, but product placement research suggests that brand placement can have greater impact with

consumers than is typically found with comparable advertising exposures (Karrh, McKee, & Pardun, 2003). The vast majority of studies conducted on the subject also confirm an overall tolerance for branded entertainment, and even an appreciation of the approach in certain cases of successful integration (Nebenzahl & Secunda, 1993; CPMA, 2013). However there are demographic and cross-cultural differences in consumer responses to brand placement. For example, European movie watchers object more than North Americans to brand placement (Hall, 2004), but there is a general acceptance of brand placement in Asia-Pacific (McKechnie & Zhou, 2003).

Placement characteristics are also critical; when and how brands are woven into the storyline can often be more important for effectiveness than the number of viewers (Friedman, 2003). Research suggests that memory of the placement is likely to be higher if the placement is meaningful and that there is a connection with the plot (Russell, 2002). The seamlessness of the brand placement is an important factor in judging its success (Cowlett, 2000). In addition, how a brand or product is used and by whom is important (Morton & Friedman, 2002). Characters on the screen that share brand use with viewers can contribute to the relationship between audiences and characters (DeLorme, Reid, & Zimmer, 1994), and a brand's association with a celebrity can increase its credibility (Morton & Friedman, 2002).

Finally, although branded entertainment is generally accepted as a communications tool in the US, stricter regulations make it less common in other parts of the world. All broadcasters in the European Union are forced to adhere to the European Commission's TV Without Frontiers Legislation. This is only the minimum requirement – nations can also impose additional restrictions. In France, for example, strict regulations are placed regarding brand placements, and in the UK, producers and broadcasters cannot take inducements as regulators attempt to enforce clear distinctions between programming and advertising. And in Italy, laws that ban 'surreptitious advertising' look unkindly on product placement. In Asia however, less rigid regulations have allowed branded entertainment to develop rapidly.

A key challenge and obstacle to the growth of branded entertainment is being able

to measure its effectiveness. In a recent study of practitioners' attitudes towards the practice, Um & Kim (2014) found a fair degree of skepticism about the ability to gauge the effect on viewers from a single branded entertainment program. For the practice of product placement, academics suggest that message impact should be assessed at recall, persuasion, and behavioral levels (Balasubramanian, 1994). Amongst practitioners, measuring placement's effectiveness is still a rough-and-ready art, but unaided recall and brand recognition are the two most popular means of assessing placements (Karrh et al., 2003). However, a recent study by Hang (2014) suggests that brand recall/recognition alone may underestimate brand placement impact, and that marketers should use multiple methods to measure branded entertainment effectiveness. Among the more original measuring tools is that of iTVX, a US-based specialist in branded entertainment. Their method allows real-time measuring of placement effectiveness on the basis of 50 variables, and produces a ratio (Q-ratio) expressed in relation to the comparable cost of a 30-second advertisement, where a Q-ratio of 1.0 is equivalent to 100 percent of a 30-second spot. The evaluation tool also analyzes visual quality of the placement (mode of appearance and the clarity of the pronunciation) of the brand name in a citation, and the degree of integration of a placement into the storyline. That being said, there are still some critics that question the high investment that branded entertainment requires, and it is critical that a more formalized measurement model be established to allow accountability (Russell & Belch, 2005; Um & Kim, 2014).

Branded entertainment and tourism marketing

Although branded entertainment is not mainstream in the tourism and hospitality sector, marketers in the field have been using product placement to reach target markets for some time. British Airways, for example, was one of the first companies to be endorsed by James Bond in his movies, and Virgin paid a large amount for a promotional tie-in with the 1999 film *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*. The movie contained a huge plug for 'Virgin Shaglantic', and star and writer Mike Myers promoted the film in the US by appearing on posters for Virgin Atlantic with the headline 'There's only one virgin on this poster, baby'. Hotels have also got in on the act. Marketers at Atlantis Resort in The Bahamas have turned to product placement in films as a part of their

advertising strategy. In the hit film *Meet The Parents* a poster advertising the Atlantis is clearly visible in the background of airport scenes. The Plaza Hotel in New York was heavily featured in *Home Alone II: Lost in New York*.

Destinations, too, have begun to see product placement as an opportunity to gain exposure (Morgan & Pritchard, 1998). Countries like Malta, Georgia, Singapore and Iceland offer extra tax credits to producers if a production is going to be good for tourism. The Malta Tourism Authority (MTA), for example, offers a cash incentive, as well as logistical support, to film and television productions that depict 'Malta as Malta'. And Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) in countries like the UK, Australia and The Bahamas, are particularly proactive in seeking production that might lead to greater awareness for their regions. VisitBritain, for example, has been targeting Indian film producers for some time in the belief that they can be persuaded to use British locations for 'Bollywood' films, and, thereby, generate significant economic benefits for Britain's tourism industry (Woodward, 2000).

However, tourism marketers have not traditionally incorporated an integrated approach that ensures synergy between locations and movie scripts, focusing instead on a shotgun approach towards production budgets offering incentives such as tax breaks, and travel discounts (Horrigan, 2009). But there are signs that some tourism organizations are moving away from mere product placement, to strategic branded entertainment in order to attract tourists through the mediums of film and television. A 2008 marketing campaign from Ritz-Carlton and American Express, for example, featured three short original online films to promote the brands to younger guests. The films were all expertly done. They were sleek and provocative, luxuriously set at Ritz-Carlton properties and subtly incorporated the Amex card in each. One film focused on customer service and service recovery in particular. Called 'The Delay', the film features a young woman on a weekend getaway (after a boyfriend has broken-up with her) to see a Duncan Sheik concert. She suffers a flight delay that causes her to miss the event and the airline also loses her luggage. The story is about how everything begins to get better after she arrives at the Ritz-Carlton. In the final scene, the hotel concierge really goes above and beyond by arranging for Duncan Sheik to come to hotel to play for the woman.

A more recent example of branded entertainment in the tourism sector comes from Australia, where Qantas partnered with Twentieth Century Fox to bring an episode of the US sit-com *Modern Family* to the country. The airline spent millions of dollars in its tie-up with the show, and almost ten million American viewers watched it when it aired, with a total global audience of 100 million expected after re-runs, syndication, digital catch-up and DVD sales are factored in. Qantas timed a digital advertising campaign aimed at *Modern Family* viewers with the episode's broadcast. Qantas ads were seeded across sites including online streaming network Hulu where the episode was preceded by a "This show is presented by Qantas" voiceover and a video ad. Qantas, in partnership with Tourism and Events Queensland, offered special fares from the US to Australia, linked to the episode. Other Australian brands that paid to be part of the *Modern Family* episode included Aussie Bum, Hayman Island and Optus.

BACKGROUND TO THE CASE: PROMOTING THE U.S. VIA BRANDED ENTERTAINMENT

Brand USA was established by the Travel Promotion Act to spearhead the nation's first global marketing effort to promote the US as a premier travel destination. In a period described as 'The Lost Decade' (Dow, 2011), between 2000 and 2010 the country's share of international arrivals declined by 36 percent. America had become 'middle-aged', neither as attractive as the timeless, historical destinations of Europe, nor as alluring as the newcomers of the East. Marketers realized through extensive research that in order to reignite interest in America, communications would need to show that there is more to the country than meets the eye; that America really is welcoming to all; and that there are fresh and unexpected discoveries awaiting in the US. They also 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 the marketing platforms (see Figure 2).

INSERT Figure 2. Experience Pillars

In April 2012 Brand USA unveiled the new marketing campaign, employing a fully integrated marketing strategy, with a mix of television, digital, billboard and print advertisements along with a robust online presence and social media strategy to reach potential visitors. Brand USA also looked towards branded entertainment as an innovative way of reinforcing the new brand values.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The case study tracked the recent major developments and implementations of brand entertainment initiatives by Brand USA. As Wheeler, Frost, and Weiler (2011) explain, a case study “sits within an interpretative paradigm and thus employs a qualitative research methodology” (p. 17). This involves data collection from secondary documents and participant interviews (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

First, to gain an understanding behind the structure of the case, secondary data was reviewed from various sources including media articles, marketing strategies, campaign materials, websites, and social media channels. Data was content analyzed and key aspects that demonstrated the application of branded entertainment concepts from the literature in observed industry practice were extracted. Second, participant interviews were conducted to gain a more holistic perspective of the case. The participants included destination marketers from Brand USA, other Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) around the US, representatives from tour operators involved in the initiatives, and marketing research companies who have expertise in the measurement of branded entertainment.

The objective was to provide a study that was rich with multiple perspectives to explore the application of existing theory to practice. To this end, this study is integrative: key quotes from participant interviews are immersed with findings from secondary data in order to tell a fluid, coherent story. Generalizability of findings was not a goal of the study given the exploratory nature of the research. Overall, the study was conducted with a view to demonstrate applications of brand entertainment theory in the area of tourism marketing.

FINDINGS

Brand USA used three media platforms to promote the country to tourists via branded entertainment: television, film and digital. It partnered with television producers, leveraged the IMAX experience, and teamed up with National Geographic Travel to present engaging stories that would appeal to tourists internationally.

Television

In 2013, Brand USA launched a new website 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 UK; and engaged the viewer beyond television to additional online content.

As a result of the television submission website, Brand USA had over 80 entries in just two months. Following an external committee selection, entries were shortlisted to three, and the first program to be produced was *Extreme Frontiers: USA*, which was broadcast in the UK on Channel Five late in 2013. The program reached over two million viewers in the UK alone, and was eventually expected to reach 100 million viewers globally. Produced by director Russ Malkin, owner of Big Earth, the four-part series followed well-known thrill-seeker and adventurer Charley Boorman, whose expedition began in Hawaii before he and Malkin travelled over 8,000 miles across 22 states, to “showcase the eclectic cultures, history, landscapes, locals and adventure that the USA has to offer” (Brand USA, 2013).

Boorman and Malkin travelled predominantly by motorbike across the entire country, from East to West. Exploring the history of the US, the two dove on a WW1 German U-boat in Beaufort, and joined in re-enacting the 4th of July battle in Charlotte. Riding out with EagleRider, a motorcycle tour company, the team travelled across Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas before being hit by an impressive lightning storm in New Mexico. The intrepid adventurers then made their way through Colorado,

Wyoming, Utah ending up in California for the traditional final biking convoy from Pt. Mugu to Venice Beach, Los Angeles. Brand USA's president and chief executive Christopher Thompson said: "It's a show about discovering the US. It's a great opportunity for us to tell our adventure story through compelling channels. Charley Boorman's a great ambassador. He had some crazy ideas - we had to reign him in a little and make sure everyone could do these things."

Brand USA developed a dedicated web page on their consumer website (discoveramerica.com) for the show featuring video excerpts from the series, photographs, and links to Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest. On the website were also links to travel information (including an interesting 'Tune Your Trip' site where visitors could customize a trip to the US) and a link to the show's own website. "The discoveramerica.com website is our main call to action and where we direct all consumers to find out more about holidays in the USA and to house information to inspire them to make the USA their next holiday," said Sarah Barnett, PR & Communications Director for Brand USA in UK and Ireland. The program is currently being sold globally and will appear in over 90 territories, but as a result of the program being broadcast in the UK alone, EagleRider created an, 'Extreme Frontiers Guided Tour', of which they have already sold 60 packages. EagleRider was an official sponsor of the show, giving away an all-inclusive guided motorcycle tour via a sweepstakes competition to kick-off their partnership with Brand USA and Extreme Frontiers.

Building on this initiative in 2014, Brand USA, in conjunction with the US Travel Association, launched a new broadcast/production program at the annual IPW conference in Chicago. This allowed broadcast and production media from the UK, Ireland and Australia to participate in face-to-face appointments with US travel and film organizations to find out more about filming in the US. Once again, the idea was to encourage producers to feature the US as a premier destination and leverage the new brand promise. "The premise behind this was to make sure that those in the media realize there are people and departments in the USA who can support filming – be it providing story ideas, fixers, film permits or the like," said Sarah Barnett.

INSERT Figure 3: Charley Boorman on the cover of the *Extreme Frontiers: US* DVD

Film

In April 2014, Brand USA announced that it would be partnering with MacGillivray Freeman Films to produce a documentary film for IMAX theatres. The \$10 million IMAX movie will showcase the country's national parks. MacGillivray Freeman has produced such IMAX-format films such as *Everest* (1998), *To Fly!* (1976), *The Living Sea* (1995) and *Dolphins* (2000). The movie will be shown in those countries where tourism to the US has been on the rise, especially China. IMAX Corp., the Canadian big screen movie theatre operator, has a deal with Wanda Cinema Line Corp., Asia's largest cinema owner, which will involve the building of 210 large-format theatres in China by 2021. Shaun MacGillivray of MacGillivray Freeman Films said "US national parks feature some of the most grandiose and awe-inspiring landscapes on the planet, and we are thrilled to bring them to the giant screen. The size and immersive nature of the IMAX and giant screen platforms is the perfect canvas to showcase the beauty and wonder of the national parks. We are excited to take global audiences on a journey into these great places that inspire the adventure in all of us."

Brand USA's Christopher Thompson said that sponsors were underwriting most of the cost for the IMAX movie, and that it was "a creative way to reach the consumers themselves" (Martin, 2014). Jay Gray, Vice-President of Global Market Development for Brand USA, said: "Around the film's release we will host a red-carpet event for the trade, and after the initial distribution in cinemas, we will multi-purpose that content so agents can use the entire film and shorter clips as sales tools."

According to the National Parks Promotion Council, the film and the promotion efforts that Brand USA will run around the film will invite viewers around the world to join in the centennial anniversary of the National Park Service. The effort will provide a

platform around which Brand USA will run a global great outdoors campaign that will engage key partners in the travel and outdoor industries and allow them to speak to international travelers and invite them to engage in specific outdoor experiences in the US. When announcing the project, Brand USA launched a teaser video on YouTube.

INSERT Figure 4: IMAX Press Release

Digital

In a final branded entertainment initiative, Brand USA teamed up with National Geographic Travel on a digital campaign to showcase five iconic road trips across America to international travelers. Through the campaign, Andrew Evans, National Geographic Travel's Digital Nomad, embarked on five road trips that highlighted the beauty, bounty and unique travel experiences one could expect from the American open road. The five road trips he took in 2014 were Western Trails, Route 66, Mountains and Prairies, NorthEast Corridor and Rhythms of the South. Evans is a veteran travel writer for National Geographic Traveler magazine and National Geographic's Intelligent Travel blog. "I have always been fascinated by road trips and feel that there can be no better way to see the real heart and soul of the United States than by driving cross-country," said Evans. "I will document my experiences and the people and places that touch me along the way in real time using various social media channels, so that my followers may embark on this once-in-a-lifetime journey with me."

Evans began his journey in Chicago traveling the famed Route 66, and then continued through Illinois, Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. He communicated his experiences via tweet, blog, vlog and Instagram on NationalGeographic.com's Digital Nomad blog (<http://digitalnomad.nationalgeographic.com>), his Twitter feed @WheresAndrew and his Where's Andrew Facebook page. The Digital Nomad site also featured an interactive map tracking Evans' whereabouts during his journey. Evans uploaded videos and photo galleries from each of the cities he visited.

“One of the best ways to discover and experience the USA is by car, and that’s why we’ve enlisted the support of National Geographic Travel and Digital Nomad Andrew Evans to take us along for a ride,” said Brand USA’s Christopher Thompson. “Andrew will help tell the story of the USA by car as he travels along 23 destinations reporting his experience through Brand USA and National Geographic’s digital channels. It is marketing, but it’s also storytelling. Finding partners to tell our stories in unique and compelling ways. We have so many compelling stories beyond gateways, where Route 66 travels through. There’s a story to be told about Route 66, in today’s time, which also includes its history.” By the end of his first road trip in May 2014, Evans had over 35,000 Twitter followers, and nearly 8,000 ‘likes’ on his Facebook page. The Route 66 campaign alone had over seven million impressions in ten key target markets: Australia, Brazil, Germany, Canada, France, India, Mexico, South Korea, Taiwan, and the UK (Brand USA, 2014).

INSERT Figure 5: The Digital Nomad’s Road Map

DISCUSSION

It has been suggested that the potential of film tourism is often not fully recognized by DMOs who tend not to exploit the ‘destination image enhancement’ 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 (Hudson, 2011; Oxford Economics, 2007). In this study, the concept of branded entertainment was explored and an integrative case study was conducted to investigate the application of theory in observed industry practice. The case study suggests that if destinations can think creatively and work closely with the film and television industries to facilitate production, they have an opportunity to capitalize on the subsequent exposure.

The branded entertainment model presented earlier suggests that there are certain key factors that influence the effectiveness of branded entertainment, the first one being supporting promotional activity. It is evident from the case that Brand USA not only exploited the power of entertainment to promote the US as a travel destination, they supported the initiative with promotional campaigns around the brand integration, a tactic that has proved successful in the past with consumer brands (Sauer, 2005; Vranica, 2004). They looked beyond tradition media and developed online channels through a dedicated web page on their consumer website featuring video excerpts and photographs, as well as social media communities with links to Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest to engage viewers beyond television content.

A second major influence on success is the brand characteristics, with not all brands lending themselves equally to branded entertainment (Zhang et al., 2010). Destinations like the US however, are realizing that placing a destination in a film or television can be very effective in gaining exposure (Morgan & Pritchard, 1998). Brand USA had a head start, with an established brand name and a country that is relatively easy to identify (Ephron, 2003). Perhaps what the country does not have at the moment is a unique personality (Um & Kim, 2014), so Brand USA's efforts were strategic in nature, using the four experience pillars of the great outdoors, urban excitement, indulgence, and culture, to guide the messaging and create such a personality. Storytelling also sought to create an emotional link with the consumer, and it has been argued that the show and entertainment dimension of branded entertainment is an excellent opportunity to create an emotional connection with viewers (Heath, Brandt, & Nairn, 2006; Lehu, 2007).

The third major influence on branded entertainment success, according to the model, is the media platforms used, and in this case, Brand USA chose three major platforms – film, television and digital. As suggested earlier, for advertisers trying to reach an international market, films may be the best option, so to capitalize on the outbound Chinese market, Brand USA sponsored the cost of movie production in an effort to leverage the growing impact of the IMAX experience on Chinese viewers. But the partnership with television production company Big Earth on *Extreme Frontiers*:

USA, also resulted in a wide global reach with 100 million anticipated viewers for the television show. Finally, by teaming up with National Geographic Travel on a digital campaign, Brand USA leveraged the influential nature of social media (Mangold & Faulds, 2009) capitalizing on emerging research that shows social media interactions can lead to high levels of emotional engagement (Sashi, 2012).

As mentioned earlier, placement characteristics are also critical to success. When and how brands are woven into the storyline can often be more important for effectiveness than the number of viewers (Friedman, 2003). Further, marketers need to ensure that there is a connection between their brand and the plot as memory of the placement is higher if the connection is meaningful (Russell, 2002). Brand USA followed an integrated approach to establish that connection, ensuring a synergy between actors/TV hosts, locations and movie scripts. By partnering with televisions producers, leveraging the IMAX experience, and storytelling through National Geographic Travel, Brand USA was able to show that is more to the country than meets the eye and that there are fresh and unexpected discoveries awaiting potential visitors. Further, research shows that an association with a celebrity can increase the credibility of a brand placement (Morton & Friedman, 2002), and so by teaming up with both Charley Boorman and Andrew Evans, Brand USA's message was even more powerful.

The final two influences on branded entertainment success, according to the theory, are consumer attitudes to the technique, and regulations. Without follow-up research it is difficult to assess the consumer reactions to each marketing initiative, although one can assume that reaction will be positive given that we already know from research that there is an overall tolerance for branded entertainment (Nebenzahl & Secunda, 1993). The target market for the IMAX movie is China, where there is a general acceptance of the technique (McKechnie & Zhou, 2003) and amongst younger populations (Hall, 2004). Brand USA is unlikely to find obstacles in the way of regulations either, with a general relaxation of rules pertaining to branded entertainment over the last decade (Lehu, 2007).

It was suggested earlier in the paper, that a key challenge and obstacle to the

growth of branded entertainment is being able to measure its effectiveness. In this particular case study, it may be too early to comment on the success of the three initiatives. There is some evidence that the television series resulted in actual travel bookings, but at the time of writing the IMAX film is still in production, so the effectiveness of this initiative remains to be seen. However, there are signs that the digital campaign is having a positive impact. As mentioned, by the end of Andrew Evan's first road trip, he had over 35,000 Twitter followers, and nearly 8,000 'likes' on his Facebook page. Digital success relies on the level of engagement within each social media channel (Facebook, 2014; Shively, 2013), and such engagement indicates that followers are actively, and willingly, spreading stories for a brand as their interactions are shown to their friends, who may in turn discover the brand and become an ambassador on their own networks.

According to some, the new frontier in branded entertainment is creating less overtly promotional content that can stand on its own merits and earn bona fide, non-paid circulation from consumer who adopt and share it. Described as 'authentic content' by marketers, it carries and communicates the brand's core values and, as such, has exponential marketing impact if embraced and shared by audiences and eventual consumers (CPMA, 2013). To spread such authentic content, it is critical for brands to choose an ambassador who has demonstrated influence among his/her digital channels in order to maximize social influence (Bernoff & Li, 2008), and it is clear that Evans has shown past successes and continues to enjoy high levels of engagement among his followers. For example, a recent report by an independent market research insights firm, Littlefield Brand Development (2014), identified Evan's role as a key social media influencer on Twitter based on the frequency of his posts, and number of followers. On Facebook, Evans consistently receives fan comments on his posts and more importantly, he reciprocates by responding to their comments in a very timely manner. The key to developing brand loyalty through social media is to interact with fans to show that their opinions are genuinely considered (McWilliam, 2000). Typically, this is done by responding to comments within a post, or by creating new stories to address their interests.

Conclusion and further research

There is certainly need for further research before one can conclude that all DMOs should start funding film and television programs. As branded entertainment becomes an increasingly pervasive form of marketing communication, it may lose its novelty and become subject to the clutter that has characterized advertising over the last few decades. It will require the monitoring of the effectiveness of the strategy over time to determine whether and how such developments come to affect viewer attention, recall and attitude. Care must be taken not to cross the line, imagining that it is possible to go on creating programs focused on one brand or product indefinitely (Lehu, 2007).

But to date, little research has studied the effectiveness of branded entertainment (Um & Kim, 2014). While current product placement studies typically measure message impact based on persuasion in unaided recall and brand recognition (Karrh et al., 2003), a more holistic measurement model for branded entertainment needs to be developed as recall and recognition alone may underestimate its impact (Hang, 2014). Future researchers are also encouraged to investigate the impact of branded entertainment on different cultures. This is particularly important given the growth of North American television and movie exports to developing countries. As shown in this study, Brand USA sought to leverage the IMAX experience in the Chinese market, and although the theory suggests that there is a general acceptance of branded entertainment in China (McKechnie & Zhou, 2003) follow-up research is required to test this hypothesis.

Finally, it is important that tourism marketers monitor changes in this dynamic environment. A recent white paper that analyzed the branded entertainment sector in depth, highlighted recurring themes of convergence, blurring lines between brand marketing and storytelling, increased use of video, and a shift in emphasis to experiential, authentic content (CPMA, 2014). The paper also stresses the value of brand-created experiences as one of the most effective tactics for building consumer engagement. Tourism marketers are in a strong position to take advantage of these trends given the fact that what they are selling are experiences. It is hoped that this case study on Brand

USA can serve to encourage more tourism practitioners to look beyond traditional marketing channels to appeal to tourists in evermore captivating and engaging ways.

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