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Peircean Semiotics and Tourism Promotion: Some Advice We'd Give VisitDenmark if They Asked

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INTRODUCTION

There is an extensive literature on tourism promotion (*inter alia* Wicks and Schuett 1991; Hummelbrunner and Miglbauer 1994; Hall 2002; Henderson 2007; Konecnik and Go 2008). Topics covered in this vast literature include the importance of segmentation (Ahmed 1996), differences between marketing to domestic and foreign tourists (Ooi 2002; Beeton 2004) and the social and political construction of place in tourism promotion (Ooi 2004). In this paper, we take a different approach in which we use recent research on tourism theory (Metro-Roland 2009) to examine why some tourism promotions work and why others fail. We focus explicitly on three recent advertisements by the Danish tourism organization *VisitDenmark*.

The choice of Denmark as the context for this paper is based on three practical considerations. First, the senior author of this paper has traveled to this country annually since 1995, and therefore, he has some familiarity with it. Second, Denmark is a small nation with, on the whole, a relatively uncomplicated history that makes placing tourism promotion within the larger context of identity promotion easier. Third, the Danish economy is export-led, with approximately 85 percent of what is produced in the country exported annually (Knudsen and Kotlen 2006); thus it has sophisticated international marketing expertise. Yet somewhat paradoxically, Denmark's tourism promotion efforts have been notably unsuccessful (Ooi 2002). A case in point would be the recent "Danish mother seeking" viral advertisement that led ultimately to the resignation of Dorte Killerick, managing director of *VisitDenmark* (Copenhagen Post, Sept. 25, 2009, 14:42).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Our approach to tourism promotion in this paper may be termed as demand-driven or tourists' perception-driven (Konecnik and Go 2008). The novelty of this approach lay in its use of the recent reconceptualization of the tourist experience as a semiotic process. MacCannell (1967) first proposed that the tourist experience be treated as an exercise in semiosis. However, MacCannell's use of semiotics was in the background of his writing and, therefore, largely ignored. It has been only recently, in the research of Metro-Roland (2009), that the tourism experience has been clearly articulated as a semiotic process. Metro-Roland relies on the semiotics of Charles S. Peirce because Peircean semiotics is more appropriate than Saussurean semiotics to highly visual experiences, such as tourism. The Peircean sign is comprised of three parts: object, representament and interpretant. The object is the thing observed; the

representament is the image of the thing observed in our mind; and the interpretant is the meaning of the thing. Meaning for Peirce is habitual. That is to say that meaning comes from what Peirce calls “collateral information” – the sum total of our accumulated knowledge, be it codified or tacit. For Peirce, it is only when the “object pushes up against the interpretant” that a re-figuring of meaning occurs. Of course, the object pushes up against the interpretant all the time when we tour and this is why tourism is generally regarded as “educational”.

If, as this theory of the tourist experience suggests, tourism is educational, then what role might tourism promotion play? We would argue that promotional materials are not intended to educate but to persuade. They are intended to provoke curiosity, which tourism theory suggests must be connected to recognition, so that a desire to be educated via tourism is the result of the promotion. It is the need to provoke curiosity that explains why promotional materials frequently rely on bold images and provocative content. Additionally, message content is restricted by available time. One can convey less in a split second look on a billboard than in a 30-minute infomercial. These arguments suggest the following hypotheses:

- a. Promotional materials (e.g. advertisements) that connect most closely with what is already known (collateral information) about a place are most effective;
- b. The bolder the promotional material, the greater the subsequent curiosity of viewers;
- c. The shorter the exposure to the promotional material the less time there is to provoke curiosity.

METHODOLOGY

Sixty students were assigned to a control group or to a group that watched one of three tourism advertisements from *VisitDenmark*. All groups filled out a survey that asked four questions:

1. “Have you ever traveled outside the U.S.?” (yes or no);
2. “Have you ever traveled to Europe?” (yes or no);
3. “Have you ever visited Denmark?” (yes or no); and
4. “How likely are you to visit Denmark in the future, assuming you had sufficient resources to do so?” (scaled 5-1; with 5 meaning very likely).

The advertisement was shown to the viewing group between the third and fourth question. Cross-group comparison allowed for an assessment of the effectiveness of the advertising with respect to the hypotheses.

Those viewing advertisements were assigned to watch one of three advertisements. The first group watched an advertisement that first aired in 2005. This advertisement is built around six key words: cozy, free, innovative, beautiful, technological and open. The advertisement intersperses these key words with scenes from the country as a musical soundtrack plays. Other than the soundtrack, there is no narration. The second group watched the recent “Danish mother seeking” advertisement, which was originally hosted on the popular Web site Youtube. In the advertisement, a young mother and child are seen seeking the father of the child. We are given to believe that the child is the result of a short-term relationship one evening in Denmark and an example of “hygge,” the Danish word meaning roughly “cozy” gone somewhat awry. The father of the child is encouraged to e-mail the mother, who can be reached at *visitdenmark.dk*. The third group watched an advertisement similar to the first advertisement, but without words.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results indicate that subjects in the control group are less likely to visit Denmark than subjects who watched advertisements. However, subjects who watched the first advertisement were more likely to visit Denmark than those watching the other advertisements.

With respect to the hypotheses, it is clear that the second advertisement (“Danish mother seeking ...”) is theoretically the better promotional piece – it may be more closely connected to what we know, and it is clearly more shocking/bold and shorter. However, connections to what we know and boldness only further promotions if the net result is a substantial increase in desire to travel to the site.

With respect to the control questions, none of the students surveyed had been to Denmark. Those who had traveled outside the U.S. before were only slightly more likely to wish to visit Denmark than those who had not. Those who had visited Europe before were much more likely to desire going Denmark in the future than those who had never been to Europe. Finally, we should not that all three advertisements ultimately fail. If the role of promotional materials is to “move product”, we should hope that subjects are much more likely to visit Denmark after encountering promotional material, not only slightly more likely as is apparently the case.

CONCLUSION

Current tourism theory suggests that effective tourism promotion connects with what tourists already know. We think that this raises questions as to the degree tourism promotion advertisements should seek to be educational. Generally, given the semiotic nature of the tourism experience, education takes place once tourists are at the tourism site, not when they are considering whether they should go to the tourism site. Therein lay the problem with recent advertising by *VisitDenmark*.

The Danish case is a useful example because it must be admitted that much of the world knows relatively little about Denmark. For example, Americans we have encountered know virtually nothing about the country. It was this line of thinking that led Ms. Killerich to place the unwed mother advertisement. But what that advertisement fails to take into account is the question, “What do we want people to know about Denmark?”

Despite a general lack of knowledge about Denmark, good starting points for advertisements about Denmark exist. Most people know (even Americans) that the capital of Denmark is Copenhagen, and often they know about the amusement park Tivoli and about Hans Christian Andersen. They might know about Danish furniture and Danish beer. All of these are better starting points for advertisements than an unwed Danish mother and “hygge,” the abstract concept of late night sunlit (or in the winter, candlelit) parties with good friends, good beer, good food and good conversation.

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