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The “Retrotour:” A Case Study in Collaborative Nostalgia Marketing

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ABSTRACT

Responding to the owners of several aging roadside motels and attractions in rural New Hampshire, researchers used nostalgia tourism as a conceptual foundation upon which to inventory properties and develop an owner-led collaborative marketing program. As a result of these efforts, a group of property owners now meets monthly to focus on marketing, with plans to secure funding for an inventory of additional properties (diners, drive-ins, general stores etc) and dedicated marketing. This visual presentation will trace the results of both the property inventory and the collaborative marketing venture, called the “New Hampshire Retrotour.”

Keywords: *nostalgia, collaborative marketing, retro, motels*

INTRODUCTION

New Hampshire has a long and storied history as a tourism destination. From the 19th century summers spent at the Grand Hotels to the auto-oriented roadside motels of the 20th century, the state is rich with opportunities for visitors to (re)experience the past. While many of these properties still exist, many others (the motels in particular) are fast on the road to extinction due to changes in travel patterns and declining economic conditions.

Because historic destinations such as these can channel nostalgia, an opportunity exists to leverage this history for the benefit of tourism development. In fact, tourism in which people seek to experience some form of history has become one of the fastest growing segments of the entire industry (Russell, 2008). This is commonly known as nostalgia tourism, an emerging phenomenon in which visitors actively seek to relive their perceptions of the past by invoking cultural traditions, tangible artifacts, and natural landscapes (Catton and Santos 2008; Kerstetter, Confer, and Bricker 1998; Kibby 2000). In New Hampshire, examples of nostalgia tourism include agritourism, which conjures nostalgia through the rediscovery of old-fashioned farming techniques or wholesome farm-to-table produce. In addition, New Hampshire’s three remaining grand hotels (the Mountain View Grand, the Mount Washington, and Wentworth-by-the-Sea) are marketed as the last source of the opulence and hospitality bestowed upon nineteenth-century visitors who sought escape from hectic city life.

Responding to the needs of the owners of several aging roadside motels and attractions in rural New Hampshire, the Institute for New Hampshire Studies at Plymouth State University used nostalgia tourism as a conceptual foundation upon which to conduct an inventory of properties and develop a collaborative marketing program to help the property owners market and advertise their properties. Our poster presentation will, using a case study methodology, trace the results of both the property inventory and the collaborative marketing venture, called the “New Hampshire Retrotour.” It is our hope that presenting this project at TTRA’s poster session will generate ideas and discussion for both practitioners who collaborate with property owners, and scholars interested in nostalgia tourism or university engagement.

THE CASE OF THE RETROTOUR

In late 2009, the project team completed an inventory of over 35 motel and attraction properties, in all states of repair, throughout rural northern New Hampshire. Properties were included in the inventory as long as they were in business (hosting guests) and demonstrating some adherence to the standing definition of “motel.” This inventory was also used as a master list from which the project team could contact owners and encourage participation in a newly developing owners association. The hope was that the association would grow to include motel, diner, restaurant, and attraction properties, and would serve to facilitate collaborative marketing.

These efforts would include assistance with developing Retrotour packages, creating opportunities to participate in an attractive, government-sponsored web-based marketing effort, giving permission to display a distinctive certificate and logo, providing an exclusive opportunity to sell bumper stickers and retro clothing items. This in turn would nurture the eligibility of participants to receive funding support for signage, such as a historic poster of the property, along with paint and other supplies necessary for minor repairs consistent with the “retro” theme.

PRELIMINARY OUTCOMES

The initial creation of the owners association was positive, but the process revealed several important challenges, most of which were raised by the participating motel owners. Specifically, there were measures of uncertainty regarding the target market, issues of authenticity, confusion regarding the measurement of consistency and the evaluation of properties that may be slightly outside the scope of the project, shifting project parameters (geography, period, property type), and issues of competition. Of particular importance was the question of who would shepherd further development of the initiative beyond the early organizational stages.

Despite these initial misgivings, the newly formed owner’s association is developing traction. With administrative support from the Institute from New Hampshire Studies and the Center for Rural Partnerships at Plymouth State University, a group of almost one dozen property owners now meets monthly with plans to secure funding for future phases of the retrotour project, including an inventory of additional properties (diners, drive-ins, general stores etc) and dedicated retrotour marketing. The community partners involved in the retrotel project – property owners, state policy makers, university faculty and students – are excited about this developing project and their new relationships with each other and the university.

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