

Marketing

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Turning Torontonians into brand ambassadors

By Eric Blais

Viral marketing could result in a powerful grassroots effort if everyone tells a friend, who then tells a friend

What Toronto needs now is a good dose of viral marketing.

Excuse the poor choice of words, but viral marketing might be the only way to save what's left of what some politicians still don't want to call a disastrous summer for tourism in Toronto.

The heavy discounting strategy doesn't seem to have worked. Torontonians got to see some great shows for a fraction of the price but Americans didn't bite. Mamma Mia! is on hold and The Lion King is cancelled. Who wants discounted goods if they're perceived to be defective?

The endorsement strategy might produce results. Although images of politicians eating in Chinatown might not have been reassuring. Mike Myers' strong endorsement on the Tonight Show has likely done more. It remains to be seen if the Rolling Stones' implicit endorsement of Toronto in July will impact perceptions in time to improve the summer.

What we now have is a heavy spend strategy. Millions of federal, provincial, municipal and private sector dollars will be poured into advertising and promotions. "It's time for a little Toronto" and other catchy slogans will be forever ingrained in the minds of Americans, who now might be more interested to know if Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction before its liberation by the coalition of the willing than whether or not the Centers for Disease Control and the World Health Organization think Toronto is safe.

I'm sure the tourism-marketing experts have reasons to believe that a heavy, concerted marketing campaign will produce results. The issue is when? Is it too late to save the summer? Many I speak to in the travel and hospitality sectors tell me that the critical decisions for conventions and organized travel to visit friends and relatives were either not booked or cancelled at the height of the crisis when our mayor added fuel to the fire with his brilliant crisis management skills and media training.

We can learn from the librarians. The American Library Association is holding its convention in Toronto this month, bringing 23,000 visitors. The organization was obviously concerned about the welfare of its members. Rather than show them a video of children frolicking on Toronto Island or people shopping in Yorkville, ALA reps were flown to Toronto to see for themselves. Call it a sampling strategy.

We are expected to promote Toronto as a tourism destination. It's done every year and it's part of an ongoing effort by various stakeholders who depend on the vitality of this sector. However, the same message about Toronto as a great place won't overcome people's fears of SARS, at least not in time to save this season. Addressing the negative perception head-on might actually make things worse by keeping the issue top-of-mind.

Which brings me to viral marketing. Viral marketing describes any strategy that encourages individuals to pass on a marketing message to others, creating the potential for exponential growth in the message's exposure and influence. Simply put, my telling a friend in Chicago that all is normal at home and inviting him to visit Toronto for the weekend will do more to drive visits to the city than the stunning images and great production values of a television spot.

Viral marketing might not offer photo ops to politicians who are committed to rebuilding global confidence that Ontario is a world-class travel destination, but it could result in a powerful grassroots effort if everyone is encouraged-possibly through advertising-to reach out and tell someone. The source is more credible than paid advertising, the message more in tune with the receiver's concerns and the overall appeal more personal. It's definitely more labour intensive and difficult to implement than a traditional advertising effort, but the return might be significantly higher given the multiplier effect of viral marketing. This issue affects most of us in one way or another. Most of us would gladly do our share and become brand ambassadors if encouraged to do so.

Let's do what's needed to provide a strong base level of "traditional" support for the tourism industry and spend the rest of our efforts turning every Torontonians and every Ontarian into an influencer. Viruses can produce results.

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