

Old Wine, New Bottles

Rethinking How Culture & History Are Marketed

Workshop Presented by
Mary Means & Elaine Carmichael

2001 Governor's Conference on
Travel & Tourism

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Post-Workshop Summary

Workshop Premise

ATTENDANCE IS FLAT AT HISTORIC sites and heritage attractions, even at powerhouse attractions like Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia. At the same time, history would seem to be highly popular: the History Channel and A&E's Biography series enjoy record audiences, participation in re-enactments is up and new history museums ranging from D-Day in New Orleans to the state museums in Texas and Indiana are opening their doors, with more on the drawing board. Visiting historic attractions routinely emerges as one of the top three vacation activities. People don't seem to be able to get enough.

If history is so popular, why the disconnect? What needs to change? What you think may depend on how you look at it and where you sit: in the audience, behind the ticket counter or at the visitor information booth. The workshop will explore the situation from different perspectives.

Background

ONE OF MASSACHUSETTS' STRENGTHS IS ITS top-of-mind association with history and culture. The state offers an exceptional collection of museums, historic houses, many historic communities of great charm and character, and outstanding cultural organizations—music, dance, opera and other performing arts. Tourism promotion efforts often tout these assets that appeal to discerning visitors. Heritage and cultural tourism are growing market segments. Yet, the two worlds—heritage and tourism—often seem to operate on different wavelengths even as they strive to collaborate and cooperate. How can these two groups attain more common ground?

Presenters

Mary Means heads a community planning firm known for its work in heritage tourism development. Before founding Mary Means & Associates, she was at the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and is considered the creator of the Main Street Program.

Elaine Van S. Carmichael is a planner and economist with extensive experience in tourism development, marketing, and strategic planning. As a principal with Economics Research Associates, Elaine was the project manager for the Massachusetts Strategic Plan for Tourism Development. MMA worked with ERA on the plan. Elaine, now head of Economic Stewardship, Inc., and MMA have collaborated on projects for a decade.

Elaine and Mary strongly believe:

- Tourism is a system, whose components include: products, marketing, hospitality and organization, and funding.
- Marketing is a transaction-based way of operating an organization— not just another term for advertising and public relations. It too is a system.
- The tourism system depends on a host of public, private and not-for-profit sector actors working in tandem for the common good even as they compete with one another.

Workshop Format

The interactive session was “a work in progress.” Elaine and Mary invited candor from participants, who included tourism professionals and representatives of diverse heritage and cultural organizations. Because the two “tribes” sometimes lack understanding of the “other,” Elaine and Mary started by acting out (and exaggerating for effect) the roles of a “tourism industry professional” and a “heritage/cultural organization leader”—each of whom had imbibed a few too many margaritas and decided to let her hair down about the other.

Following this candid interchange, the group was asked to take off their own professional hats and draw on their personal experiences as visitors: how did they use the formal tourism promotion “apparatus”? What were their experiences—good and bad—as visitors to heritage attractions? Discussion was lively. After Elaine and Mary offered a number of observations from their professional perspectives, the group then brainstormed about ways to improve the effectiveness of the heritage/cultural/tourism marketing environment.

Mary and Elaine rashly offered to provide a brief summary of the discussion to participants via e-mail. Here it is—and you thought we would never get back to you!

So Tell Me What You REALLY Think

Perceptions of the “Heritage Tribe” & “Tourism Tribe”

The following observations, while exaggerated for effect, resonated with the group. Grains of truth? Or strong perceptions that often operate under the surface? Discussion confirmed that “members of these tribes” back home—board members especially, felt even more strongly about “the other tribe.”

Heritage Tribe as Seen by Tourism Tribe	<i>Tourism Tribe as Seen by Heritage Tribe</i>
Your kind is so self-righteous. The buildings, furnishings are sacred objects—and must actually be protected from people. You seem to have contempt for people!	<i>You want to attract crowds and masses of tourists who will destroy our important historic and natural resources: they will literally love them to death!</i>
When people actually visit, you bore them to tears with interminable family histories and your incessant fetishizing of your many objects, most of which appear to be china and horsehair sofas. You are fundamentally irrelevant to people today.	<i>The luminaries who built our site were much more important than most people realize. It is vital that each visitor gets the facts, and yet you argue for a briefer visit. As it is, our dedicated guides can hardly cover the highlights in three hours.</i>
Of course, few people actually experience your three hour tours, since your hours are few and intermittent	<i>We are a non-profit volunteer organization. We have little money. We cannot be open every day or at the whim of a tour operator.</i>
You cry poor, and yet your membership includes some of the community’s oldest and most prominent families. You might earn more money if we were able to market you to tour operators, but we have trouble figuring out how to portray you as “fun.”	<i>That’s part of your problem. You go for the wrong kind of people, the lowbrow kind who prefer theme parks or outlet malls to anything intellectually stimulating. You ignore the sophisticated travelers who appreciate what we have to offer.</i>
Those people’s money is green too, and they support businesses in this community that employ your friends and neighbors and, incidentally, that fund our marketing effort.	<i>You tourism people listen only to your dues payers. You don’t do anything for those who cannot pay.</i>
Our marketing efforts benefit you. Even though you are basically a free rider, you still get a listing in our visitor guide and brochure.	<i>You only list our name because your promotions pieces are content-free—you don’t understand anything about what we are doing, what our attractions really provide.</i>

As professionals in both camps tried to engage in consumer-centered marketing (what are visitors seeking and how can we satisfy that need?), many of their tribal leaders—the membership or even the board members who set the policy agendas and approve the budgets— had conflicting perspectives. In other words, while workshop participants understood that marketing is a system, hospitality folks still have a “heads on beds” model of success, and heritage/culture folks have an equally skewed model. Participants found common ground in that both tribes share the challenges and frustrations of trying to get their organizations to change while governed too often by unenlightened boards.

Examining the Tourism Apparatus: The Traveler’s Perspective

- Q:** Where do you go for information when planning a getaway? How do you make decisions?
- A:** AAA, word of mouth, web, travel magazines, newspaper articles, cable TV shows, independent guides and books, internet.

Funny. As travelers, no one seems to be using the “official” tourism promotion tools and information system—the Getaway Guide, tourism promotion advertising, visitor information centers, and brochures. Hmmm.

Note: This workshop session followed the lunch speaker, Peter Greenberg, Today Show travel editor, who sharply criticized the “sales and marketing” mono-vision of the tourism promotion industry: brochures filled with hype and styled photos that belie reality. Audience response at the luncheon and during this workshop confirmed the grains of truth in his observations.

Commenting on *the tourism apparatus*, people spoke of:

- disappointment when the reality proved to be nowhere near the promise.
- how their interests—nature, cultural activities, heritage—were seldom featured in tourism promotion literature

Commenting on *getting info about getting there*, people spoke of:

- Frustrations with customer service phone systems, particularly getting trapped in impenetrable automated systems and unable to reach a human being.
- Generally good experiences from chambers of commerce—call for detailed info once the general vicinity of the trip is known
- Websites as very helpful—if they are kept up and accurate.

Commenting on *using visitor centers at the destination*, people spoke of:

- Too much information, wheat and lots of chaff
- Lack of good information on cultural, heritage, non-profit attractions, which are underplayed in settings like visitor centers, yet may well be the reason many visitors have chosen the destination
- Getting good service, good information from staff who tried to plumb the visitor’s interest and direct them

Commenting on *deciding how to spend time*, people spoke of:

- Referral by one attraction’s front line personnel to another nearby terrific attraction.
- On my own, search out information on my interests (nature, hiking) and what is available
- B & B owners and innkeepers are often a wealth of information who know their clientele’s interests

Commenting on the *worst heritage attraction experiences*, people spoke of:

- Historic sites and cultural organizations and kids. No effort to make it child-friendly, yet many families with kids traveling
- Opposite issue—entire presentation dumbed down and/or cutrified to accommodate one or more children
- Trapped—endless guided tour with rabid volunteer
- Next tour not for 90 minutes, and little to do with the waiting time.
- “Stepford” Tour Guides: just push “play.”
- Tour guides who ignore visitors, treat them as interlopers
- Boring presentation

As visitors, what have been your best heritage attraction experiences?

- Personal interaction with interpreter
- Something for everyone in my travel party
- Places that convey the experience quickly
- Using objects as vehicle for story rather than as stand-alone items
- Presentation style that engages audiences
- Multiple modes of conveying information—not just wall o’ text or droning docent
- Effective audio-visual tools

Putting Old Wine Into New Bottles: Ideas

What would help cultural/heritage attractions and tourism organizations find common ground, provide more appealing visitor experiences, provide better information for seekers of cultural and heritage experiences? Lively discussion touched on:

Boards of organizations (both attractions and tourism promotion organizations) are often less aware than staff that these issues are important. Ideas:

- Board members spend day interacting with visitors
- Term limits—need outsider to suggest
- Take them to conferences, get their endorsement
- Develop pass for volunteers to visit other sites free, be able to refer visitors to other stuff in region.
- Do focus groups, and have board members observe and listen behind one-way mirror.

Making distinctions between attractions, lodging and eating establishments is difficult when all are dues-paying members. Ideas:

- Use “time” as tool for conveying relative quality, importance of offerings (if you have three days, don’t miss...)
- Initiate quality standards for attractions touting “heritage.” Look at Lancaster County, PA heritage tourism program as model. Contact: Scott Standish 717-299-8333 or standish@co.lancaster.pa.us

Wrap Up: What Next?

Heritage and cultural attractions are a major competitive advantage for Massachusetts. Yet, in an age when films like *The Patriot* and books like *Cold Mountain* attract huge audiences, attendance at many

of the Commonwealth’s heritage attractions is flat. Approaching the issue from a marketing systems perspective would indicate attention is needed in **product development** (the experience being offered) and **communication** (how it is described and presented to intended consumers). That, in turn, suggests joint efforts between heritage attractions and tourism promotion organizations. However:

- most heritage and cultural attractions—non-profits that traditionally eschew self-promotion on both intellectual and financial grounds unless it furthers their educational mission—are new to a marketing perspective.
- most tourism promotion organizations are dues-payer driven, and tend not to engage non-profit players effectively.
- each sets store by certain principles that the other finds foreign.

The gap is noticeable. Response to this session from participants was strongly positive and suggests widespread interest in working together to bridge it. Some food for thought:

- Is continuing to convene concerned leaders from both “tribes” an appropriate role for the Massachusetts Office of Travel & Tourism? With four regional “Governor’s conferences” ahead in 2002, should MOTT feature these issues?
- Should a mechanism for both groups to work together to fashion a cultural and heritage tourism product development strategy for the Commonwealth be devised? Or are the issues too specific to each circumstance and the people too busy?
- Would more information—best practices and other tales from the front—be useful? If so, should it be geared towards Boards of Directors, practitioners, or both?

Further Thoughts? Contact:

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