

Mackinac Island Finds Itself at Tourism Crossroads

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dealing with people. It's an art, not a science. You need to try to get in the people's heads to figure out what motivates them to come to Mackinac Island in general, instead of going to Tahquamenon Falls or Disney World."

Downtown, the Mackinac Island Tourism Bureau has been compiling that data. Surveys passed out at boat docks have helped the Tourism Bureau recognize just what it is that draws people to the Island.

"There are about five major things that draw people," said Mary Slevin, the Tourism Bureau's executive director: "One is the lack of cars, two is the horses, three is the hotels, the architecture and how big and beautiful they are, four is the beauty of the state park, and the fifth is 'Somewhere in Time,' not necessarily the movie itself, but the romance of the Victorian time period, the idea of love."

But marketing is not an industry solely left to the experts. Ms. Lagone said that while it may be the responsibility of a Tourism Bureau or Chamber of Commerce to put out visitors guides, the independent resident and business owner should also help contribute to the tourism industry.

"One thing that independent businesses can do to encourage tourists to return to the Island is

to develop relationships with their past customers," said Ms. Lagone. "Loyalty and referral programs, e-newsletters, and coupons distributed through the mail or e-mail can work to everyone's benefit."

Mr. Hokans said that when it comes to promoting Mackinac State Historic Parks, he does so as though it were a business.

"We're very lean and mean," said Mr. Hokans. "We can't afford not to be. We operate like a business. We have to make sure we're getting the most effective and efficient way of delivering our product and services."

Mackinac State Historic Parks has a variety of means at their disposal to help market both historic sites and the forest land. Brochures are printed and shipped to 1,500 distribution outlets, ranging from an employee cafeteria at Ford Motor Company to the Welcome Center in Mackinaw City. Rather than offering half-off coupons or similar sales enticements, the agency distributes postcards, bookmarks, and other small, tangible souvenirs. This way, said Mr. Hokans, not only do guests receive a memento of their trip, they become walking advertisements for the historic sites.

More important than gimmicks, however, he said, is simple reception and treatment of the guest. Word of mouth is the most effective means of adver-

tisement, he emphasized, and when guests have a positive experience, they share that with family and friends.

"The guests become our ambassadors," said Mr. Hokans. "They're our unpaid travel agents."

Ms. Lagone agrees that word of mouth is one of the best forms of advertisement. She noted, however, that visitors will remember not only the treatment they received at specific businesses and entertainment venues, but that of an ordinary person on the streets.

"Residents, as much as possible," she said, "must be friendly and provide outstanding service to the visitors who come to the Island. That way, when they return home, they can generate word-of-mouth buzz, telling their friends and family members about their wonderful experiences and the great service they received."

Ms. Slevin believes that for tourism to prosper on the Island, everyone must remember that Mackinac is not marketing tourism, per se, but hospitality, and a relaxing escape from everyday life.

"This year's mantra has been horses, history, and hospitality," said Ms. Slevin. "Horses are the first visual thing seen. Then, as someone is walking around, they sense the historical reference, and that the real industry here is hospitality."

Nevertheless, there are simple cases where hospitality isn't enough. Tourism has been slow throughout Michigan, and although Mackinac is an island, and is more remote than most tourist destinations in Michigan, it is firmly connected to the rest of the state.

"No island is an island," said Ms. Lagone. "It is connected to everything else. Mackinac Island's ship literally sinks or floats depending on the rest of Michigan. When Michigan's economy is in a decline, Mackinac Island's tourist market is impacted."

Studies conducted by Michigan State University show tourism currently is down throughout the state. Ms. Lagone is unable to say for certain why it is down without conducting further research, though she has some idea based on factors that generally have a great impact on the industry — gas prices, unemployment rates, and weather ranking high among them.

But for an island where tourism is the biggest industry, it's not enough to blame a sluggish season on statewide conditions. Instead, efforts are redoubled to gain new visitors to Mackinac and to attract new markets.

One of the steadiest markets for Mackinac Island has been senior citizens, which often arrive here while on motor coach trips. In recent years, however, that mode of travel has steadily declined.

"Trends show that the senior tours are falling off because people don't want to get in a bus with a hundred other people, they want to drive their own SUVs," said Ms. Slevin.

Both the Mackinac Island Tourism Bureau and Mackinac State Historic Parks have been struggling to find a new niche in the tourist market, and both have landed upon the same prospective group: students.

"A lot of culture today is lifelong learning, which for us means a lifelong guest," said Mr. Hokans. "If we get a person hooked on Mackinac when they're young and they have a truly memorable experience, then they'll come back as college students, and then later with their own family."

A slow economy and a downward trend in tourism notwithstanding, there is still plenty of good news for Mackinac Island,

which retains its position as one of the premiere tourist destinations in Michigan, ranking among the top 10 spots.

"The uniqueness of this place has the potential to shine strongly in people's minds," said Ms. Lagone. "Where else can you wake up to the clip-clopping of horse-drawn carriages, from a room overlooking a magnificent bridge spanning two Great Lakes, watch giant freighters roll by, and enjoy coffee on the world's largest porch, all before you've had breakfast?"

Tourism Bureaus: What They Do And Why They're Here

A tourism bureau is a marketing organization and the Mackinac Island Tourism Bureau promotes tourism on the Island in a number of ways. It supplies publications, publishes a visitors guide, and advertises in newspapers, radio stations, and cable television. It provides film to television stations and images and background information to print media. In addition, the staff responds to telephone and written inquiries ranging from whether a visitor can bring a dog on the Island to where to find the best place to grab a bite to eat.

The Tourism Bureau also organizes several Island festivals, like the Lilac Festival in the spring and the Fudge Festival in the fall.

Mackinac Island hosts FAM tours, or familiarization tours, where tour directors and agents visit and experience activities and accommodations available to their clientele.

The organization also works with the city, state, and federal agencies on issues that affect the business community, such as the federal cap on H2B seasonal visas, the proposed Mackinac State Historic Parks budget cut, and the city's new luggage cart and commercial delivery restrictions.

"We also work on the future," said Mary Slevin, the executive director of the Mackinac Island Tourism Bureau. "The present is important because we're in it, the future is important because that's where we're headed, and then we also have to preserve the past."

The organization has recently joined the National Tourism Association and will attend an upcoming tourism exhibit in Detroit.

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