

Branding a Wilderness Tourist Attraction and Targeting the Eco-Tourist Industry

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Abstract : *The Beartooth Nature Center (BNC) is Montana's premier wildlife education refuge. It is home to over 70 animals including mountain lions, bears, moose, bobcats, and large birds, unable to be returned to the wild after either accidents or abandonment. The BNC is located in Red Lodge, Montana which is considered the northern gateway to Yellowstone National Park, with over 4 million visitors annually.*

Nature or eco-tourism is the largest growth tourism industry in the world and is a complicated marketing field as it concerns the environment and sustainability. This article discusses the research, creative development and execution of a marketing campaign developed for the BNC for the summer of 2011. Both secondary and primary research efforts were utilized. A branding positioning TV campaign was executed and aired on local stations, targeted posters, event advertising and local promotions were used to reach residents and tourists

The findings show that community values are essential in developing the branding message. The creative was designed according to visitors and the community wanting to establish a personal relationship with the animals, or "humanizing" them. Using community values to direct the creative and strategy will be discussed in the article.

Keywords: *Branding, Eco-tourism, Attractions*

1. INTRODUCTION

Marketing and sustaining a natural tourist attraction are not always compatible. Since Yellowstone National Park was opened in 1982, national parks have been established in countries internationally in order to preserve ecosystems for the future of humanity and nature. Also, small rural communities in countries from Australia to Africa to Taiwan are using agri/eco-tourism as an economic means to save the local community and sustain their wilderness. Marketing these areas to tourists is problematic in encouraging growth while maintaining the ecological footprint which provides the attraction. Marketing has been that of the enemy of sustainability, traditionally concentrating on increasing tourist numbers and treating tourism like a commodity (Buhalis, 2000).

The Beartooth Nature Center (BNC) is located on the highway on the way to the northern entrance to Yellowstone National Park in Red Lodge, Montana. It provides a home for local wild animals that are no longer able to survive in their home environment due to being injured, orphaned, or abandoned. Grizzly bears, birds of prey, moose, lion and even raccoons and wolves all live in an enclosed but well cared for environment where tourists are guaranteed viewing them. It is the premier educational center of its kind in the region with a mission of building an even larger home in order to sustain a better environmental presence for animals unable to be returned to the wild.

1.1 Literature Review

There is a volume of literature on rural/nature/eco-tourism. Eco-tourists paid \$1200 more than the average tourist back in 2000 according to Trails.com.

One key issue is branding. The branding and marketing of natural/eco tourism areas may be more accurately described as place "boosterism" driven by political agendas in response to the growing competition between places due to the economic restructuring of markets within a globalized world (Gill, 2004; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). Such boosterism, according to Shone (2009), creates the potential for tensions between the various scales and stakeholder groups associated with regional tourism areas, which risk the denigrating of social and community values, and hence identity.

Attraction of tourists has developmental benefits that exceed the costs, with little consideration for the wider suite of impacts (social, environmental, cultural, etc.) brought about by tourism (Dredge, 2001; Dredge & Jenkins, 2003; Shone, 2009). Such a policy and planning framework, according to Marcouiller (2007), tends to create an environment where tourism is approached within a purely marketing context focused on economic yield. Ryan and Zahra (2004) are concerned with the endless search for "catch-all" branding slogans which this emphasis cultivates. Thus, brand identity and values are interrelated concepts. (Durie, Yeoman, & McMahon-Beattie, 2006).

According to Gnoth (2007), it is the values and meanings as expressed in the cultural, social, natural, and economic dimensions of people's lives that comprise the assets or "capital" of the destination. Community as a part of tourism development (Jamal & Getz, 1995, 1999) is not always considered when it comes to destination branding and marketing. And according to Schroeder and Salzer-Morling (2006), marketing is behind when it comes to including a cultural perspective and contribution.

These findings support a more holistic approach to destination branding that includes local values, cultures, and identities as part of a broader sustainable destination management philosophy (Wheeler, Warwick, 2011).

There are other concerns of marketing. One is related to the increasing number of tourists and their impact on institutional infrastructures and resources, then threatening the ability to balance preservation versus revenues. (Dearden & Rollins, 2009).

Another is articulated by Fyall and Garrod (1998) who said that marketing strategies attracting mass tourists have replaced the golden rules of conservation with contradictory commercial values, and this is resulting in change, complexity, uncertainty and conflict in the management of tourism sites where preservation should be the fundamental priority. (Donohoe, 2012).

The World Tourism Organization estimates that 'nature tourism' accounts for 20% international travel. It is the fastest growing sector at 10 to 30 % growth overall. Currently, resorts are trying to establish a Green Star System or accreditation system to improve sustainability. It must be "low impact, education, ecologically and culturally sensitive that benefits local and host communities." (World Tourism Organization, 2007)

In the United States, domestic travel combined with international tourism is a \$1.3 trillion industry, with a direct payroll of \$162 billion representing 1 out of 8 jobs (Travel Industry Association of America, 2005). To narrow it down further, an excellent nature targeting study was done based on O'Reilly's and Binna Burra resorts in Australia with the following Figure 1 explaining the targets.

Harder	Structured	Softer
Strong Environment Commitment	Strong Environment Commitment	Moderate Environment Commitment
Enhance sustainability	Enhance sustainability	Steady state Sustainability
Specialized Trips	Specialized Trips	Multi-purpose trips
Long Trips	Short Trips	Short trips
Small Groups	Larger Groups	Larger Groups
Physically Active	Physically Active	Physically passive
Expect Few Services	Services Expected	Expect services
Emphasis on Personal Experience	Emphasis on Interpretation	Emphasis on interpretation

Figure 1: The Eco Tourist Spectrum (Weaver, 2002)

The Softer Target is most suited for the BNC and is 30% of the nature tourist. They are physically passive, take short trips, expect services such as restrooms and food and emphasize interpretation such as an understanding of the animals they would be observing at the BNC. This is the perfect target audience for the BNC. Larger groups are also good to target.

1.2 Current Situation

As a result of being located on the highway on the way to the northern entrance to Yellowstone National Park, 356,000 vehicles pass by the BNC every year. Also, there are 110,000 ski tourists in Red Lodge, and another 100,000 summer visitors to Red Lodge itself. There are over 19,000 school children in the area and about 300,000 visitors to big events in Yellowstone County where there is a population of 130,000. The BNC currently attracts about 20,000 visitors each year. They have tremendous support from its donors and local community and are considered a valuable part of protecting the wilderness and environment.

The BNC has the following marketing and branding problems:

- It is unknown to tourists in terms of both its existence and its mission.
- Tourists and more residents need to understand its value.
- It has limited resources and thus must clearly state its value to the right target audience.

<http://www.yellowstonegeotourism.org/content/beartooth-nature-center/yelB9057408C0BCD4A65>

2. MARKETING METHODS

2.1 Research

Both primary and secondary research was conducted in order to identify the primary targets and their motivations for visiting the BNC. Montana had 10.5 million non-residents visit the state in 2010, spending \$2.48 billion. We looked at the audience numbers above for the local population, the students, local events and tourists to identify target opportunities. With limited resources, we would find ways to reach the residents, children and tourists by targeting large events, the school system and using PSAs on television as an umbrella for the new branding. We also recommended better highway signage to make sure the center was getting as much highway awareness as possible, association with the branding awareness. These groups are consistent with the Softer Target discussed above.

The BNC could double its current number of visitors by obtaining 3% of a combination of these groups.

An initial study of mall intercept interview of 100 revealed:

- 51% of local respondents aware of BNC
- 90% tourists visit because a local friend took them
- 60% say featured animals are primary reason they visit
- 60% will visit for more than once
- 60% want updated exhibits to keep interested
- 70% will visit while in Red Lodge
- 25% will make it a primary destination
- 33% are aware of its mission
- 85% think it is a benefit to children
- 62.1% respondents are willing to travel 1-60 miles to arrive at the zoo.
- 38% “Most definitely” would visit

Three focus groups were conducted with donors, tourists and residents in order to determine how they perceived the value of the BNC to help establish a brand positioning statement that would eventually lead to the overall slogan and campaign. We understood that residents were a key target as they were recommending the center to their guest tourists.

2.2 Branding Method and Results

We used the Means End Chain Conceptual Advertising Strategy (MECCAS) method to develop values for the BNC from all three focus groups. Figure 2 shows a combination of community values that reflect how to make sure we included local culture and social understandings in the marketing efforts.

Attributes	Physical Consequences	Psychological Consequences	Values
A home for injured or abandoned wild animals	Participation with the sanctuary of actual wild animals. I know them, I go back to visit the ones I have a relationship with.	Saving the planet, protecting the wilderness, saving the animals. I donate to save the lions who were orphans. Their names are Lewis and Clark	Universalism
Beautiful setting with gardens and pathways making it possible to always see the animals.	Easy access, food and restrooms, it's a lovely setting to spend the day.	Enjoyable experience that I can tell my friends about, I might not have seen anything at Yellowstone Park. My kids got to know the bears personally.	Hedonism
Educational materials teaching people about their lives in the wild and how they can be protected.	Learning and new understanding about the earth.	I am humbled and have a new appreciation for myself and my family.	Stimulation
Elements	Benefits	Hooks	Driving Force

Figure 2: MECCAS

One of the key values was the relationship developed with the animals. It was as if they were a part of the community, a part of the culture. For all three focus groups, donors, residents and tourists, humanized the animals. The brand positioning statement became: At theBeartoothNature Center, you will see and understand wild animals. The slogan became:

Befriend the Beasts

2.3 Campaign

Three TV commercials were produced and aired in the Yellowstone County. All three filmed the actual animals in their habitats but voiceovers were used to humanize them, having them basically tell their stories. One involved a deer thinking about crossing a busy highway saying instead he was heading to the BNC and once he got there, the two owls both

welcomed him. Another featured the two mountain lions lamenting hanging out with each other when same two owls thinking they are silly. And the third showed the bobcat with a strange boots walking around, looking ominous, and then we realize it is Jeff the BNC director coming to pet her. The campaign won a Gold Addy, from the American Advertising Federation, the Montana State Chapter.

Because of the over 300,000 people attending events in the area, a large part of the campaign promoted the new brand to events via posters, fliers and program ads. Figure 3 is the program event calendar.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Home of Champions Rodeo and Parade- July 2-4, 2011 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Float in the parade- free of charge Hand out fliers while walking through the parade Booth at the parade with animals (appropriate for a rodeo setting, barn animals). This could be a petting zoo on the rodeo grounds Advertisements in the women's magazine in Red Lodge available
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Billings Mustangs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Radio/Print combo- includes a half page advertisement and an announcement on the radio during home games. Cost is \$792 5 night event sponsorship- sponsors 5 home games per sponsor (multiple sponsors) for \$625, or \$1,000 gets 5 night sponsorship and a half page in the program Season for the Mustangs run June to September 2011
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Big Sky State Games- Summer 2011 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cost is minimum \$500 for sponsorship- this gets you in the program and flyers in the bags <i>Wake Up Your Life</i>- new run put on by BSSG on June 18, 2011. Negotiations for sponsorship pricing still in process. Put on by Blue Cross Blue Shield.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Scout Show- March 19, 2011 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No charge, offering inside or outside booth Located at Pavillion at Metra Park Hand out or offer pamphlets and brochures about family events at the center, also offer membership forms Wants the kids to engage with the animals, this includes touching them and petting them

Figure 3: Events

The brand was also promoted through the school system to reach the 19,000 school age children, with the support of the Yellowstone school districts, shown in Figure 4.

<u>Kindergarten</u>	<u>3rd Grade</u>	<u>School/Grade Assemblies</u>
Presentations will be between 30 minutes to an hour. Presentations will be tailored to suit age group; fun and exciting without being overly technical. Children in this age group will receive a small poster and a flyer to take home to their parents.	Presentations will be between 45 minutes to an hour. Presentations will be slightly more technical than the kindergarten group, but not overwhelming to students. Children in this age group will receive a small poster, flyer to take home (with admission coupon) and trading cards. When the entire set of trading cards is collected, students will be able to take them to the BNC for a free admission for themselves and an accompanying adult.	Presentations will be tailored to fit the needs of the school and could be the normal 45 minutes to one hour or longer as needed. Presentations will be tailored to fit the education grouping; if it is a K-6 assembly, then the material will be applicable and interesting to the entire group.

Figure 4: School District Curriculum

3. CONCLUSION

3.1 Sustainable branding

Including and understanding the community culture and values in relationship to branding a local nature or eco-tourist attraction appears to be a vital component to marketing. There was great support from the community and donors for the new brand. Posters, printed on recycled paper, were distributed and put up in windows in Red Lodge and at big events. TV stations ran almost double the usual number of PSAs in support of the on air campaign. According to visitor rates, attendance increased two fold during the summer of 2011.

The current goal of the BNC is to raise \$12,000,000 to build a new and larger and even more environmentally sustainable place to extend its mission. This would not be possible without attracting more tourists and donors, or without marketing.

But it is difficult to know if marketing alone is the reason for the increased attendance during the summer of 2011 and if the BNC can continue the same success while sustaining its mission. For example, twenty miles north, the Billings Zoo closed for a period of time due to management issues, leaving the BNC without competition for one month. And, the poor economy influenced entertainment categories so that the demand for short trip destinations increased. Both of these occurrences helped the attendance at the BNC.

Soon after the campaign, the BNC director was hired by the Zoo in order to resolve their management issues. In his new position at the Zoo, he followed his BNC strategy and continued using community values and culture to rebrand and market this world class cold climate facility. Its new slogan is: Take a walk on the Wild Side. The nice thing about this slogan is that it finally represents what the facility really is and also reflects the local area which is wild and conservation oriented. Before, the zoo set false expectations and seemed to promise elephants and giraffes. Now it is using community values and setting real expectations to show northern climate species such as a Siberian tiger, red pandas, and local animals such as bears and wolves and bald eagles.

The BNC and the Zoo are able to work as partners in conservation and education for local wild animals, and attracting tourists and residents to special events. Together they promise to be a valuable and sustainable part of the local ecosystem, environment and culture. Both of their brands reflect this and thus not only garner the support of the locals, who recommend the attractions to tourists, but also the support of generations to come. That is the very definition of sustainability.

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