

DESTINATION INVITATION –
THE IMPORTANCE OF 'FACE'

DATE : NOVEMBER 2013

Just a very short time ago, while the western hemisphere early-Autumn holiday season was underway, the global travel & tourism community received another sharp reminder of the critical value of the sector. Especially in the USA when it came to the hundreds of thousands of travellers venturing across the country, and even across the globe, to fulfill their American travel dream.

With e-tickets, passports, wallets, and importantly cameras/camera phones tightly in hand, and lists of specific iconic sights to see (and be seen at through their excited, immediate on-line postings) embedded in their holiday planning memories, travellers jumped onto their tours, into their airplane/bus/car/train seats, and went off in search of adventure.

And what did they find as they approached the government-run beacons of holiday hopes?

Statue of Liberty – closed.

National Portrait Gallery – closed.

Lincoln Memorial – closed.

Smithsonian – closed.

Grand Canyon National Park – sorry.

Yellowstone – this one, too.

And many more. Not to mention...

Surrounding privately-run restaurants, coffee shops, bars, gift shops and attractions – closed, as with no tourists going to the major attractions, why stay open?

Tourist welcome – closed.

Across the country, and even at US national sites across the globe such as Normandy Memorial Cemetery, the US Government shut-down had reached into the furthest corners of the travel industry, and deepest parts of traveler's hearts, and shut them down.

http://skift.com/2013/10/07/american-tourisms-gallery-of-shame-sorry-tourists-were-closed/?utm_content=buffera869&utm_source=buffer&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=Buffer#1

Thankfully, while the national government is now back in business, and the tourism industry back to hosting travellers, unfortunately, the damage is done.

In a poignant letter to the President of the United States and Congress during the shut-down, as stated clearly by Roger Dow, CEO of U.S. Travel Association, and one of the nation's boldest champions when it comes to getting the story across regarding the importance of the sector,:

"The government shutdown is throttling America's travel sector, which, until now, has been one of the principal drivers of U.S. economic recovery. Every day the government is shut down is another \$152 million down the drain and another day of financial insecurity for as many as 450,000 U.S. workers whose livelihoods are supported by travel."

Like a fire fuelled by California's Santa Ana winds, the figures of US\$152 million per day and 450,000 US workers spread, Dow's sound bytes flying like splinters igniting further flames as, across the country, tourism industry leaders and followers spread the fiery message.

AFTER THE INFERNO

With the industry now back to work, and with calculations of direct and indirect losses complete, it would be easy to simply put the "We Are Open" sign back in the front window and move forward.

To do this, however, would be a great waste of an opportunity to look closer at what lessons have been left in the ashes of crisis. And, as importantly, to heal the burn scars.

The heart of the industry must not be forgotten – the traveller.

For those travellers who had planned, booked and paid for their American adventures, the time and investment cannot be recovered, regardless of refunds and reschedules offered. Having set aside precious savings for a holiday, counted sleeps in sweet anticipation, taken leave time out of the annual work calendar, only to find that the promise of experience cannot be delivered has an impact that is as, if not more, damaging for the industry, especially in the longer term.

Those on the front line of traveller experience delivery – tour operators – were faced with the immediate challenge of dealing with not just collapses of tour itineraries, but collapses of traveller smiles.

Gavin Tollman, President and CEO of Trafalgar Tours, is unedited about his feelings of the impact of the shutdown as over 56 of the company's US tour itineraries were affected by closures of national monuments, attractions and icons.

"We had significant numbers of guests from all around the world, their trips were ready to go. We worked tirelessly to reschedule where we could, we tried to find solutions depending on itinerary where they can be worked around alternatives, and these adjustments were made. But with the parks and historic highlights closed, especially when the entire itinerary was made up of national parks and venues, there was very little left for our guests to do. Many simply opted not to travel."

Tollman goes on to pose the key question going forward:

"Why should travellers invest their dreams into a destination that may be sour, service-starved, or simply closed. This whole situation was a huge blow to traveller confidence."

LOCAL LOSSES, GLOBAL LESSONS

This is where lessons from the US Government shutdown, and its impact on the tourism industry, become of value to the global tourism community.

When challenges occur around the sector, be they:

- political crisis, as recently experienced in *destination USA*, as well as in various other tourism parts of the world
- economic crisis, causing the frustrations of locals to hit the streets
- environmental crisis, raising questions around a nation's care for its wildlife and land
- issues of national safety & security

fundamental questions need to be asked, questions that will dig deep into the lasting impressions on travellers. These include:

- What damage was done to the invitation of the destination to come and visit?
- What damage was done to the destination's spirit of hospitality felt by those visiting?
- What damage was done to the position of the destination on traveller wish lists?
- Did the destination lose 'face'?

Ultimately, what did this period teach us? What do we need to do to reestablish the destination as one that can be trusted by travellers to deliver on its promises?

And how did it make us feel when we look in the mirror:

- As destination promoters?

- As patriots?

Travel and tourism puts nations on show through the destination front window dressing. As a destination's image rubs off onto a nation's image, so too does the national image rub off on the destination, *'What does this say about us as a nation?'* is inextricably linked to *'What does this say about us as a destination?'*, in good times and bad.

And what does it say about the destination to tourists?

For many nations confronting challenges, the fear of *'losing face'*, being looked at by others with a sense of shame, embarrassment and even ridicule, can be immense. And, sadly, does exist. Examples need not be called out – sadly there are too many events occurring that will have immediately come to mind for readers.

What is important for destination leaders, be they public sector destination promoters or private sector businesses, is having in place:

- Ongoing, direct appreciation of the impact of destination, and indirectly national, image on travellers when it comes to desire to visit, and ability to act as an ambassador,
- Systems of monitoring perceptions related to the above,
- Coordination with key messaging stakeholders (Government departments, private entities, chambers/associations/organisations) linked to national and destination image, though not necessarily directly to the tourism sector, to ensure collective understanding, and where necessary, coordination, of efforts to ensure shared movement forward,

And,

- Steadfast focus on the promise made to travellers, and the fundamental responsibility to ensure delivery, physically and emotionally.

Most importantly, for the travel and tourism industry – for destination, property, airline, airport, event, attraction, and all other types of brands – as important as maintaining 'face' is for the role-players, there is one face that matters most and must be our #1 priority – the face of the traveller.

If that face is smiling, genuinely and with an excited awe and appreciation, we can feel proud that we are successfully honouring the promise of our great industry.

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