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MARKETING A PROSPECTIVE

BY

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ABSTRACT

The issue of marketing on a limited budget is explored with the word-of-mouth being isolated as the most effective type. This type of strategy almost exclusively depends upon quality services.

MARKETING A PROSPECTIVE

In the heart of the Appalachian Mountains there is a plateau which overlooks the Bluestone River gorge a thousand feet below. Located on this site is what "Better Homes and Gardens" referred to as the crown jewel of the West Virginia Park system, and one of the thirteen super parks in the nation, Pipestem State Park. From any one of several vantage points on the park a visitor can observe an inspiring view of some portion of the four thousand plus acres set aside for people to relax the tension and to refresh their souls.

Mile for mile, hour for hour, dollar for dollar, Pipestem offers the finest investment to be found for family vacations, private retreats or conferences in this part of the country. The main lodge has one-hundred thirteen attractively appointed guest rooms, a spacious restaurant and snack bar, fine shops and services, a gameroom, heated indoor pool and saunas, and entertainment for wonderful evenings. Nestled along a ridge are twenty-five resort cottages completely furnished miniature homes hidden in the woods. There is a choice of two, three or four-bedroom cottages, all with stone fireplaces and a private deck off the living room - luxurious housekeeping for the whole family...or just the two of you.

In splendid isolation, accessible only by aerial tramway, Mountain Creek Lodge awaits beside a sparkling blue mountain stream. Accommodations specializing in country cooking, a gameroom, and a lounge where the evening chill is removed sitting by the fire.

The Visitor's Center, at the top of the thirty-six hundred foot tramway features a panoramic view of Bluestone Gorge, and a country store with authentic handcrafts. From here, it is but a short jaunt to the Recreation Center which offers another gameroom, an olympic size outdoor pool, a snack bar, a par 3 golf course and a well-stocked pro shop.

The list goes on and on...18-hole championship golf course, horseback riding, hayrides, archery, tennis, miniature golf, overnight trail rides, guided nature walks, movies, amphitheater programs, campgrounds, church services and a supper club.

The advent of interstate highways 64 and 77 has made Pipestem State Park possible and accessible, but more is needed to keep the path to our door well trod. Obviously too, a state institution cannot or does not compete in the advertising market like private industry.

Therefore, developing marketing techniques to fill our Park has been one of the greater challenges and opportunities. TV, the most obvious ad program to some has been the least profitable to us, as a dollar investment. On the other hand, we have received favorable response through talk shows on our area television stations. These stations represent a 200 mile radius from Firestem which includes at least five different states.

As for the printed media, "Golf Digest", "Better Homes and Gardens", and "Trailer Life" have given us more exposure than we could afford to buy and probably with better results because they wanted to come to Firestem.

A major part of the hard-fought battle for an infinitesimally small advertising budget received from the state is used by in-house representatives to attend travel fairs and to finance sales trips. The sales trips are rather a new venture for us, and will require some farsighted planning and development, but we believe that it is a route we need to follow. By this means, our sales director or a Park representative can pinpoint specific groups to fill our specific needs way in advance. By enticing a business group from out-of-state to hold a conference at Firestem State Park when we need guests in January, we can reasonably expect one out of ten conferees to return sometime with their family. Except for the word-of-mouth response there is nothing else that strikes us as being so promising.

Word-of-mouth advertisement about our Park from former guests has increased our group and family business each year without a slump, through inflations, recessions, coal strikes and gas shortages. We have no reason to expect a significant change from this program. Our annual occupancy runs anywhere from 66% to 70% for the Park so we do have much room for improvement. It is especially through the enticements of recreation that we are trying to draw more and more people in January and February. These are the bleak months and we are developing new techniques such as package plans, winter discounts, additions to winter activities - bob sled run with a return tow and crosscountry skiing.

There is a particular marketing aspect that is sometimes overlooked and that rests in the potential of the recreational/travel intern. It would appear that in this time of leisure enterprise, neither the lodging industry, nor the colleges and universities are capitalizing as they should on this resource. Generally, the colleges have an undeveloped, but much-needed program to offer a host of thousands who are not even aware that such training exists. Even Connie Hilton did not think much farther than the bell-boy level until he was indoctrinated. Secondly, like so many other businesses, we in tourism have been shortsighted in recognizing opportunities, as well as unwilling to train and develop those people who will determine the future of our industry.

At Firestem we regularly sponsor one to three interns a semester from nearby schools. Historically, we have hosted interns from Concord College, West Virginia University, Marshall University and The Pennsylvania State University. As Assistant Superintendent and responsible for our intern program at the Park, I try to see that each intern is exposed to all levels of responsibility in each department. While we do allow the intern to spend extra time in the area of his interest when time allows, it is only after he has responded in writing about his understanding of those other departments he has worked in. Because these people are inexperienced we encourage their evaluations and suggestions since they see what we see every day, but from a totally different slant. The powers of observation are not nearly so sensitive as what is learned by doing. Each intern is made to understand that he or she is to be an active participant in the work-a-day world of the Park. Whether polishing a floor, handling a voucher, or taking the mail run, it is certain that unless they have a feel and appreciation for each of the department's responsibilities and functions, they cannot fully understand how the entire operation must run as a unit. Moreover, to accept less on our part, hurts not only the intern, or our Park, or the college but negatively effects the lodging industry while abusing a unique marketing opportunity.

We are too-fast approaching the time when our work days will equal our off-days in the pay period. One obvious conclusion is that we in the leisure business had better be prepared. At Firestem we have been looking ahead. Keeping in mind that winter-time is our

leanest period we have gone to the drawing board with the hope of adding indoor tennis courts, gymnasiums with handball and squash courts, bowling lanes, exercise rooms and a covered ice-skating rink. Expansion of the present facilities will include more guest rooms, larger convention center which will seat 1,000, an additional 18-hole golf course, enlargement of the campground and additional cottages. With the large volume of land Pipestem holds at the present and our utilization of only 600 acres, which are fully developed, we have ample room for future expansion without destroying the natural beauty.

According to the Economic Impact of West Virginia's State Park System that was compiled for 1979-80, 37% of our attendance in state parks is professionals and administrators, 36% have college degrees and 51% have an income between 10 and 25 thousand dollars a year.

Pipestem has as bright a future as any type of leisure business because we have undeveloped land for which there will be greater demand, and we have the capacity to adapt to most any change.

Pipestem began as a dream and we are still continuing to grow and expand to greater fulfill that dream. We welcome the change!

COMMENTS

The number one leisure activity involves eating out. Therefore, many programs and facilities can be improved up to 60% by adding an effective food service, especially where social outcomes are an important part of the function.