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Interview with Dale A. Brill, chief marketing officer, Visit Florida

Dale A. Brill, chief marketing officer, Visit Florida says the organisation doesn't use visitflorida.org to market to consumers.

"That is our industry site used to communicate to our Partners and other non-consumer stakeholders. visitflorida.com is the centerpiece of our fulfillment strategy. We've invested more in our site in the past three years than the first seven combined. If there's one word to describe our web strategy, it's immersion," says Brill.

"Our international sites feature third-party articles written by native speaking travel writers. Even the models in the photography are native to the languages spoken. We've developed content for the African-American community, again, written by travel writers who represent the very market we're targeting. In the next two months, we're launching a special site section designed specifically for Florida residents that will appeal to this key market with a unique voice, navigation and functionality that speaks to the needs of resident guests under the campaign: You should see the state you're in. True to our brand promise as the "trusted source," there is no other single source for Florida travel and meetings information on the planet," says Brill.

As Visit Florida celebrates its 10th anniversary as a successful public-private venture, Brill shared more information in an interview with EyeforTravel.com's Ritesh Gupta. Excerpts:

Being the only premier, official tourism marketing corporation representing the state of Florida, how do you assess progress made by Visit Florida in the recent past?

This year, Visit Florida celebrates its 10th anniversary as a successful public-private venture. The public portion includes funding from the state; the private side includes active participation in co-operative programs by more than 3,500 tourism industry Partners. While we would be the first to point out that we are only one spoke in the wheel that drives the tourism industry, the results over the past ten years speak volumes. Visitation has increased 92 percent from 44.8 million visitors to 85.8 million. Tourism tax revenues increased 51 percent to \$3.4 billion. Tourism spending also is up 51 percent, infusing more than \$57 billion into the state's economy. Our Partner base has increased from 407 in our first year to more than 3,400 today. It's been a good decade for Florida's tourism industry and we're proud to be a part of that success.

What kind of marketing initiatives taken recently by Visit Florida have been successful? Why do you think so?

Let me address those questions in reverse order. We're working hard to

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integrate absolutely everything, and those efforts are tied to two applied philosophies. The first is anchored in the synergistic relationship between the umbrella brand, which is the Florida experience, and the diverse array of local and regional brands. The second philosophy views our relationship with our potential guests as a trusted conversation. As such, our brand promise is to serve as “the trusted source” for vacation and meeting planning. In our interaction with potential guests, we are very much in the business of listening and responding to their needs in hopes of remaining a welcome source of information going forward. This is more than an abstract philosophy—so important is this orientation that we refer to our direct marketing efforts as the Dialogue Program. The dialogue we create stands in sharp contrast to the outdated model of advertising, fulfillment and prayer. Too many DMOs spend the lion-share of their budgets on advertising with the goal of enticing folks to request literature, say a visitor’s guide. Then the relationship ends with a unspoken prayer that the guide was enough to impact their decision to come. As Rick Page asserts in the title of his book, “Hope is not a strategy.”

What role do you think Visit Florida has played in promoting the destination?

We serve two primary roles. First, as I suggested earlier, we make sure the umbrella brand, the Florida experience, is well represented in the market place. Much like a home owner’s association, we work to ensure that the overall perception of the neighborhood is as appealing as possible, and widely communicated, so that the value of the individual homes is protected, if not increasing. We do this, however, without regulating the activities of the individual homeowners, if you will. It’s widely recognized by all who participate in our model that its in all our best interests to have someone taking care of the umbrella brand.

Second, we create marketing opportunities for our Partners that they can’t create for themselves. One approach to this is negotiating co-op media buys in which the individual ad rates for our Partners are lower than they can negotiate on their own. Another is introducing innovation in our programs such that we assume the risk inherent in new initiatives, for example, a new e-marketing approach. We take on the risk inherent in pilot projects and report the outcome as openly as possible so that our Partners can learn from our failures as well as our successes. The key is balancing a portfolio in which the risk taken is proportionate to proven marketing vehicles.

In your opinion how hotels and intermediaries can form lucrative partnerships with destination marketing organisations?

I’m uncomfortable with the insertion of the word “lucrative” in the question, particularly because readers may be tempted to assume that in the absence of being immediately lucrative in nature, the relationship between the hotels and the DMOs can be ignored. These two groups need each other. Period. For a decade or so, Pine and Gilmore, among others, have been calling attention to consumers’ experience orientation. With that as a given, I believe that consumers view the hotel and its immediate surrounding as a Gestalt entity. What I can do in Bradenton is part and parcel to where I’m staying. The holistic relationship is an opportunity for hotels and DMOs to work together. Intermediaries have a different game to play. They must find ways to bring value to the table for the hotels, attractions and related experiences. Connect the guest to their experience in a way that adds value cheaper or better than anyone else.

This long-standing industry event brings together the best in industry to discuss the hot topics and trends in Revenue Management. [Click here to see last year’s agenda and speakers and watch this space for more information on the 2010 event.](#)

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Visit Florida uses permission e-mail or media to communicate travel opportunities to consumers. Kindly share info on what have you done regarding the same recently?

Our e-mail marketing efforts are only one part of the Dialogue Program I mentioned previously, although it plays a very important role in maintaining the conversation. We funnel our interactions with potential guests into one of nine experiential categories, such as luxury, golf or romance. Our database has grown by triple digit percentages. Churn rates have dropped. In an average 12 month period, a member in our Dialogue Program will received six e-mails from us. We're challenged by duplication across name sources, and we need to further improve our harvesting from organic sources (i.e., our direct efforts versus third-party opt-ins).

Kindly share info on how are you balancing offline and online marketing initiatives?

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[dab] My sense from listening to others talk about this challenge is that there is a tendency to mischaracterize the challenge in terms of budget allocations. I cringe a bit at the misplaced bean-counter influence that tends to reduce marketing strategy development to budget balancing. Our integrated approach is tied to assessing the effectiveness of each—sometimes with formal measures (science) and sometimes with informed professional opinion (art)—against the ability to address the goals and tasks of the potential guest as they progress along the consumer travel planning process. In truth, we're in our infancy in this effort, but the needs orientation is far more useful to us than the allocation orientation.

How do you think search can be used to stimulate demand to certain destinations?

Allow me to demonstrate my grasp of the obvious. Search is huge. Clearly the internet, and search in particular, is the workhorse when consumers are in the search and plan stages of the travel planning process. The published statistics speak to the role search plays as well. Next year, we'll be piloting SEM (search engine marketing) projects to test its effectiveness for us. We've benefited greatly from SEO (search engine optimisation), with the first position against more than 230 key words.

What's on your agenda? What initiatives are being planned for future?

[dab] With budget challenges ahead, we're now at the point of piloting a few projects each year while taking care of our core business: promoting the umbrella brand and creating opportunities for our Partners. Big projects are always glamorous and get the spot light. For example, we're actively working on an innovative booking approach that will address our accommodation Partners' objections to third-party systems that burden them with additional inventory management. Yet success in the coming years for us means refining our Dialogue Program to the point of flawless execution.

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