



GET REAL BROCHURE APPEAL

A beautiful brochure isn't necessarily a successful one, observes ALEX GIBSON

As marketers we are often called to empirically prove any assertion we have regarding marketing expenditure. Scientific proof is held to be the litmus test of whether any assertion regarding the effectiveness of marketing activity can be stood up. But as we all know sometimes it is the anecdotal, the creative judgement that can prove just as effective. Today we are only now beginning to recognise that the sometimes positively bizarre methods used by some sophisters of the weather have had a strong predictive value. And so it is sometimes when trying to see how the wind will blow in hospitality marketing.

Writing in this column a couple of issues ago, I urged you to get busy in putting in applications for this year's HSMIA Awards. The response to this call, and the other efforts to encourage participation, seem to have paid off with a record entry level. But interestingly the spread of entries across the various categories was anything but even. A marked trend that I have noticed in the past few years is an almost perfectly inverse relationship between entry levels for the internet categories and the those for the brochure categories.

As the former categories have seen a huge increase in interest and activity, there has been a striking decline in the number of brochures submitted for consideration. Whereas just a few years ago the judging panel would have received a deluge of brochures to cast their eye over, today there are much less rich pickings. So what's happening to what was once the most common form of marketing communication for the hospitality sector?

Certainly there is no doubting the role the internet as a means of directly reaching consumers with real time interactive information. But on every overseas sales visit, hotel sales reps' baggage allowance is still stretched as they load up a supply of brochures. Tourism Ireland spends almost €3m annually on brochure production, without counting the brochures it distributes via its international print distribution centres. So it's clear that the brochure remains important, even if both industry players and academics have paid scant regard to fully addressing its importance.

Once seen as a prime means of imparting information to the visitor, today it's viewed as an important part of the integrated branding process. Details such as pricing, maps and facilities can generally be better communicated via a website today, so the brochure has to work harder at creating an emotional bond with the prospective visitor. While there is no shortage of tips on how to design a brochure more fundamental questions remain unanswered. How is the brochure read? In conjunction with other marketing materials or in a stand-alone fashion? Is the brochure taken by the respondent on their travels? Is the brochure received via mailing with a covering letter, or distributed by hand at large consumer fairs? How is the copy and imagery connecting with the tourist? When large sums of money are spent in designing and printing brochures a number of rudimentary research questions should be investigated:

1. Looking at the initial impact of the cover or front of the brochure (what does the cover 'say' to the prospective holidaymaker?)

2. Looking at the relevance and clarity of the information provided within the brochure (and specifically with regard to page design and layout – and product information is clearly vital here);

3. Looking at the persuasiveness of the brochure as a whole (and this should include an understanding of how and why brochures are used in the holiday planning process).

Most of the large successful tour operators have used both qualitative and quantitative methods to research detailed aspects of their brochure designs, and this research has covered front covers, page layouts, the relative importance of visuals versus text in page design, the need for both hotel and destination photographs, the need for photograph titling, the usefulness of destination maps, the clarity of alternative typefaces, copywriting styles, the use of sub-headers to break up text and even paper quality.

Any communication, including a brochure, should be a part of the total marketing plan for a business. If your marketing strategy determines that tourism brochures are an effective method for reaching your target audience, then carefully design the best brochure possible.

The most expensive misconception is that brochure sells – that a prospect will read the entire of the brochure with glowing adjectives, and sign a contract as a result of it. A brochure, in this context, is a pamphlet or booklet that describes an organisation and its function, or a hotel with its services... it maybe used to explain all or a segment of an organisation or a services supplier.

A good tourism marketing brochure should finish its duty as a good overview of an origination, a destination, a hotel or travel company, and inspire the reader to the next step if he (she) is interested in the supplier's services.

In many instances such as at consumer fairs, the prospective tourist is not actually in the frame of mind to buy – but the brochure can still perform a valuable brand building role.

That is the situation when a brochure does its responsibility of branding in the mind of a future client. And it's worth remembering that a brochure, no matter how attractive or thorough, is rarely devoured like a novel.

Bits and pieces of information aren't enough. The brochure may be able to help the prospective traveller visualise the experience but the internet offers this form of virtual reality on a far more powerful basis.

Very often the brochure does not differentiate your offering from that of competitors. While it may have the production values that clearly signal your spa is luxurious, what it most likely fails to do is to go one step further and say in what way your form of luxuriousness is different from the competitive set. Remember that when it comes to brochures it's not a beauty contest; it has to be a selling one. ♦