

In what ways did integrated marketing communications aid the Welsh Government's Year of Adventure campaign.

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In what ways did integrated marketing communications aid the Welsh Government's Year of Adventure campaign?

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Introduction

From the snow-capped peaks of the Brecon Beacons to its 900-mile crystal clear coastline, the small nation of Wales has proven to be an important contender in the British and European tourism market. Its ancient history and culture offers a unique travel experience unlike anywhere else in the United Kingdom, and aims to provide every visitor with an unforgettable experience (Welsh Government, 2016). But as digital technologies continue to enhance the ways in which countries present themselves to the world, the destination management organization (DMO) for the Welsh government, Visit Wales, has played an integral role in improving and sustaining its competitiveness (Morrison, 2013: 5).

As the leader and coordinator of the country's brand image, the DMO established a comprehensive seven-year strategy which supported the sustainable development of tourism in Wales (Dale, 2007: 360). Following an extensive research programme compiled of visitor surveys and tourism forecasts, Visit Wales adopted the use of the marketing mix; a conceptual framework that seeks to identify and address each marketing challenge, such as product, price, place and promotion (Smith and Taylor, 2004: 6; Tench and Yeomans, 2009: 411). With an ambition of increasing investment, extending the tourism season and driving a 10% growth in tourism earning by 2020 (Welsh Government, 2013a: 5), prioritization of government spending would ensure that improvements were made on the activities and events available in Wales. This would not only

provide a better product for tourists, but also improve the country's value for money by offering greater opportunities for consumer spending. Furthermore, advances in transportation links by road, rail, air and sea shows evidence of place, by enabling visitors to venture further than the capital and into the heart of rural Wales (Welsh Government, 2013a: 11).

But in recent years, it is evident that promotion has received the most prominent focus; with eight distinctive counties, each with their own unique landscape and culture, the DMO developed an approach that would acknowledge and enhance the qualities of each area, whilst also considering the diverse needs and interests of the tourists that visit each year. To achieve this, a series of thematic marketing campaigns were introduced that focus on the three main components of Welsh tourism; this launched in 2016 with the Year of Adventure, and has been followed by the Year of Legends in 2017 and Year of the Sea in 2018 (Welsh Government, 2015: 2). Perhaps the broadest of the three, the Year of Adventure aimed to position Wales as 'a leading UK adventure destination' (Skates, 2015: 4), using integrated marketing communications so ensure that 'a unified message is consistently reinforced'

(Smith and Taylor, 2004: 14) across a broad range of promotional tools. Importantly, evidence of Booms and Bitner's extended framework (1981) can also be identified within the Year of Adventure campaign, which also considers people, physical evidence and process. Through the implementation of promotional tools, the Welsh government considers each of the communities involved in the marketing relationship, embracing not only the tourists, but local residents and business owners as well. Business-to-business PR tools such as training conferences and promotional guides provide evidence of this, while simultaneously demonstrating the DMO's desire to provide customers with physical evidence of quality Welsh service (Groucutt et al., 2004: 21).

This dissertation seeks to explore the promotional activities undertaken by Visit Wales in 2016, to identify the Year of Adventure's specific impact on the Welsh tourism economy and its success in promoting the country as a leading adventure tourism destination. The thesis will incorporate a transformative approach, using academic literature from the likes Morrison (2013) and Smith and Taylor (2004) to gain 'an overarching perspective' (Cresswell, 2009: 16) of Visit Wales's promotional activities and its effectiveness, by comparing the differences and commonalities of particular themes (Prediger, 2008: 1). A combination of qualitative and quantitative surveys and interviews will also be implemented in a process of methodological triangulation, as both are required to gain a full, contextual understanding of the research topic (Gray, 2004: 28-37; Greene and Caracelli, 1993: 195; Creswell, 2009: 15).

Year of Adventure 2016: Marketing Communications Mix

The communications mix, otherwise known as the promotional mix, has played a significant role within destination management throughout history (Morrison, 2015: 319; Smith and Taylor, 2004: 10; Tench and Yeomans, 2009: 500), and refers to the all-encompassing communication tools available to any marketer. Morrison (2015) highlights the six key promotional tools most regularly used by DMO's, which includes direct marketing tools such as advertising and sales promotion, as well as the elements in the PR mix, like press releases, sponsorship and conferences (Smith and Taylor, 2004: 8; Drucker, 1994; Groucutt et al., 2004: 8). This chapter seeks to explore the key

techniques that the Welsh Government have implemented throughout the Year of Adventure campaign, and how these may have contributed to meeting growth targets.

As discussed by Pike (2008) and Ashworth and Goodhall (1988), any holiday destination carries a significant fiscal and emotional risk for customers. (Ashworth and Goodhall, 1988: 213-239; Pike, 2008: 200-201). Unlike tangible products, academics such as Chon (1999) and Hunt (1975) argue that a destination's true value or suitability can only be assessed once it has been experienced by the consumer; this heightens the importance of marketing in the tourism industry, as it plays a critical role in influencing the consumer's decision-making process (Pike, 2008: 200-201). But as the purchase requires particularly high-involvement on behalf of the consumer, it was important that the Year of Adventure could ensure its image of Wales as an adventurous and vibrant country to explore all year round was believable and sustainable (Rosenbaum-Elliott, et al., 2011: 123; Pike, 2008: 200-201; Skates, 2015:2).

The basic communications model highlights the difficulty of this, as noise distractions from competing messages or on behalf of the receiver may result in promotional messages becoming misinterpreted or ignored completely (Morrison, 2015: 320; Moriarty et al., 2015: 127). Importantly it is unlikely that every receiver will decode the intended message the same way every time, but Morrison (2015) argues that the implementation of integrated marketing communications (IMC) can assist DMO's such as Visit Wales by "aggregating and making messages in different media consistent with each other" (Morrison, 2015: 320). Higham (2011) also offers a contextualised approach, suggesting that in order for the small-scale, economically vulnerable businesses that make up the Welsh tourism economy to succeed, they require a "strong or cohesive marketing voice" (2011: 140). Often described as an organization's effort to sustain a holistic and coordinated marketing approach (Tench and Yeomans, 2009: 500), IMC can aid an organization to achieve its goals of long-term brand equity by creating an on-going dialogue amongst its target audience (Blakeman, 2015: 2); Smith and Taylor explore this idea, suggesting that:

Carefully linked messages also help buyers by giving timely reminders, updated information and special offers which, when presented in a planned sequence, help them move comfortably through the stages of the buying process.

(Smith and Taylor, 2004: 16)

Morrison (2015) and Percy (2014) offer similar findings, claiming that travellers are more likely to recall an image or idea if they are repeatedly exposed to it (Percy, 2014: 1;

Morrison, 2015: 321). In the case of the Welsh government, the adoption of a thematic campaign that focuses on adventure activities should condition audiences to believe that Wales is a prime destination for thrill-seeking travellers.

Upon analysis, integrated marketing strategies are considered positively amongst academics; Percy (2014), Morrison (2015) and Groucutt et al. (2004) conclude that IMC enables organizations to reach smaller, more specific audiences by using a combination of visuals, text and spoken narratives (Percy, 2014:1; Morrison, 2015: 321; Groucutt et al., 2004: 324). Blakeman also summarizes this ideology, suggesting that "IMC ensures that the message will be remembered

by replacing unwanted one-size-fits-all tactics with an individualized message... [that] they can understand and relate to" (2015: 2). But she also shares the views of Ang (2014), who states that in order to prevent wasteful and ineffective marketing, the organization must have a complete understanding of the audience they are targeting (Ang, 2014: 4; Blakeman, 2015: 2). This is particularly important within destination marketing, as the messages are required to incite a response from a wide range of stakeholders.

According to Ken Skates, the Deputy Minister for Culture, Sport and Tourism in Wales, the Year of Adventure seeks to gain the attention of four distinctive yet varied tourist groups; the first, adventure specialists, are defined by their high-level of interest in specialist activities, including climbing, kayaking or mountain biking (Visit Wales, 2015b). Travellers with children, or active family explorers, also make up a key demographic; according to the DMO, these groups are actively looking for holiday destinations that have "plenty to do in all weather conditions" (Visit Wales, 2015b). Both of these groups require a strong product-led strategy, in order to promote the wide range of activities available across the country. Pre-family explorers, such as younger couples and backpackers, offer a similar approach; Visit Wales explains that this demographic is likely to be "curious and brave" (Visit Wales, 2015b) and are therefore more likely to seek out new activities and experiences. Importantly, this group differs in that they are more likely than average to uphold upmarket tastes, therefore the quality of the product and services that Wales can provide is of key importance in their buying decision. The fourth group, older explorers are also more concerned with a service-led approach; Visit Wales explains that these groups "want accommodation and food that is high quality and good value" (Visit Wales, 2015b), and are more interested in exploring the natural wonders that Wales has to offer, including its spectacular scenery and heritage. This highlights the importance of business-to-business communications, ensuring that hotels and B&Bs are equipped to offer the high-standard service that is expected of them. Considering Frank, Massy and Wind's Classification of Segmentation Bases (1972), Visit Wales appear to have adapted a psychographic approach, ensuring that the attitudes emulated by the audience groups correspond with the values demonstrated within the Year of Adventure campaign (Palmer, 2004: 202; Wedel and Kamakura, 2012:7). According to Palmer (2004), there is evidence to suggest that psychographic segmentation "has better predictive power than demographic bases" (2004: 202), by focusing on the unique personality attributes that distinguish one consumer group from the other (2004: 202). The following sections will consider how promotional tools have been used during the Year of Adventure to target each group using theory as a guiding framework to analyse and interpret their effectiveness (Finn et al., 2001: 13).

1. Advertising

Perhaps the most widely discussed tool within the promotional mix is the role of advertising, which is defined as the impersonal communication of messages from an organization to its customer (Ogden and Rarick, 2010: 2; Morrison, 2015: 321). Although its origins can be traced back even to the earliest of civilizations, the modern-day understanding of the term largely refers to the implementation of mass media channels, including TV commercials, billboards, radio and film, in order to inform, educate and persuade the target audience

(Tungate, 2013: 7; Bowdery, 2008: 45). Despite advancements in web technology, Wharton (2015)

shares the view that "the television set is still a prominent feature of the home and an important source of screen advertising" (2015: 5):

"Television talk is a common feature of the household and often carried beyond its walls... The household or family share not only a home space but a local culture, which is important in the reception of advertising"

(Wharton, 2015: 5)

With the help of The Orchard Media and Events Group and Cardiff-based design studio Smorgasbord, Visit Wales launched the Year of Adventure campaign in January 2016 with a 60-second television advertisement. Titled Find Your Epic, the DMO directly invited potential tourists to come and explore the range of activities that Wales has to offer; creative director Dylan Griffith explained the concept, stating that "Epic has always struck me as a very Welsh word, and we were determined to include it in some way as it perfectly summarises what we have on our doorstep here in Wales" (Welsh Government, 2016b). Linguistically, the use of persuasive and direct language should garner the attention of the audience by creating a more personalised dialogue (Janoschka, 2004: 19), which directly relates to the first step of the AIDA model; the acronym, which stands for attention, interest, desire and action, details the steps that are required in making a high-involvement buying decision (Janoschka, 2004: 19; Tyagi and Kumar, 2004: 251; Lamb et al., 2009: 408).

The clip opens with a series of magnificent landscapes, a bird's eye view of Wales' varied terrain, made up of woodland, mountains and coastline, promptly followed by people of all ages taking part in a range of exciting activities, such as horse-riding, kayaking and coasteering (Visit Wales, 2016). Semiotic analysis of the text suggests that the advertisement has been developed as a product-led tool to appeal to the broad demographics of the target audience, encouraging interest and desire by promoting the wide-ranging activities available in Wales (Bignell, 2002: 31). But Visit Wales also released four shorter clips of the advertisement on YouTube, each focusing on a specific demographic; this is important, as it shows Visit Wales' awareness of the different needs and values of each group. In the first 30-second clip titled Llyn Gwynant - Find Your Epic, which translates to family adventure, it is clear that active family explorers are the primary target. Smiling families with children young and old are pictured roasting marshmallows over an open fire, coasteering and kayaking together. Notably, the music used is much brighter than the original TV advertisement; in this way, it could be argued that the drama and thrill of certain adventure activities are being ignored, focusing more on the softer, family-friendly activities in order to best appeal to this market (Visit Wales, 2016b).

Contrasting entirely from this is the Ramsey Island - Find Your Epic clip; fast and choppy editing layered with fast tempo music is used to increase the excitement of this advert, which pictures a group of travellers braving the waves while taking part in sea kayaking (Visit Wales, 2016c). The intensity of the advert directly appeals to the adventure specialists, who are driven by their need to find "new and innovative experiences in spectacular locations" (Visit Wales, 2015b). Horse Riding, Rhossili Bay - Find Your Epic, also takes a similar approach by focusing on a specific and niche activity; the clip follows a group of six individuals as they mount their horses and ride them along the beach.

The final clip also takes a unique approach, and clearly demonstrates a need to target the pre- family explorers, or certainly young adults under the age of 30. Titled Festival No. 6, Portmeirion - Find Your Epic, low bass-like music similar to that of a dance club drums over a sun-drenched Portmeirion, a popular festival destination in North Wales. The clip opens with a group of young adults paddle-boarding, but unlike the previous clip they clearly lack confidence with the sport, pictured falling from the boards and laughing as they struggle to keep balance; this is perhaps a much more relatable and effective representation, as the larger majority of travellers are likely to be trying these activities for the first time. But its primary focus is on the food, drink and music scene that Wales can offer, with bright, colourful partygoers laughing and enjoying the unique setting. Importantly, none of these clips make specific reference to the older explorers, which Visit Wales identified as a key demographic; perhaps this demonstrates a missed opportunity on their behalf, particularly as older people are statistically more responsive to television advertisement than any other age group (Sutton and Douglas, 2013: 275).

But this concept does not come without criticism, as it suggests that audiences passively accept the messages they receive through the mass media. Recognised by academics as the hypodermic model, this process proposes that the power lies solely with the marketer, which inject audiences with information (Branston and Stafford 2010, 382; Fourie, 2007: 232; Starker, 1991: 12). Knowles et al. (2004) explore this idea further, explaining, that:

“The images projected by destination agencies - the “official image” - are not the most important source of ideas about a tourist destination held by the potential visitor. The images shaped by the news media, by the personal experience of the visitor on previous holidays and by the second-hand experiences of personal contacts of potential visitors... are far more important than the publicity emanating from the tourist destination itself”

(Knowles et al., 2004: 118)

But Visit Wales recognised that the use of one-way communication alone would not be sufficient in persuading high-involvement purchase decisions, which resulted in a series of more contextualised tools to be implemented.

[...]

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