

The Northern Likes: The case of Northwest Territories' social media campaign

By Michael W. Lever and Statia Elliot

Introduction: Building an Awareness Campaign

With a population of just 42,810, made up of 11 languages, and spread over 1,170,000 square kilometers of mostly undisturbed terrain (Tourism Fact Sheet, 2016), The Northwest Territories (NWT) is positioned to attract visitors seeking vibrant, authentic cultures amidst awe-inspiring land (Five Year Marketing Strategy, 2016). NWT is a destination with spectacular nature and adventure product, notably Aurora viewing. But like many northern and remote destinations, it is challenged by low awareness on the demand side, and capacity issues on the supply side. Geographically, NWT is 1,000 kilometers from its main markets, consequently perceptions of its product offerings can be vague, and travel costs high. Further challenging NWT Tourism is its limited budget in comparison to many of its competitor destinations. However, what NWT Tourism does have is a creative marketing team!

The Executive Director of NWT Tourism, Cathie Bolstad, knows full well that the dilemma they face is in regard to awareness – if only people knew about what the region had to offer, they would be much more inclined to visit. This sentiment is confirmed by Jillian Barber of Environics, the market research firm working with the NWT Tourism team, who discovered through surveying Canadian travelers in early 2017 that 33% of them are not interested in visiting the region because they are not familiar with what there is to see and do. This obstacle inspired the creation of a campaign designed to build awareness – share the lesser known places and activities (referred to as the Secrets) of the north with those who were previously unfamiliar with the NWT through a multi-media marketing campaign. The resulting campaign spans Canada (excluding Quebec and NWT) and features the distribution of folders containing a limited number of “gold tickets”, along with a strong online presence to offer entrants a chance to win a free trip to the NWT.

In designing the multi-media million dollar campaign, NWT Tourism promoted the Secrets via consumer shows, select restaurants, print advertising, vehicle and transit decals, but placed primary emphasis on digital technology and content marketing to build destination awareness. Acknowledged in their Five Year Marketing Strategy (2016, p.16), “technology and social media are transforming the travel industry” and a better understanding of how social media users interact with their brand is now essential. Thus, the Secrets campaign is not only intended

to increase awareness, but also to advance market analytics and responsiveness capabilities. Results-to-date confirm it is the social media component in which contest participants are most engaged by claiming more winning tickets than any other promotional activity.

Social media, enabling users to share content via applications such as Facebook, has become the modus operandi of destination marketers in the 21st century, employed to increase visibility, differentiate destinations, and generate electronic word-of-mouth, all to influence traveller behaviour (Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012). The influence can be explained in part by the theory of social presence, whereby the higher the degree of social presence, the greater social influence communicators have on another’s behaviour (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Tourism destination branding research supports an image-to-behaviour effect, and in practise, much of destination marketing is image based. A destination brand is any “name, symbol, logo, word mark or other graphic that both identifies and differentiates the destination” (Blain, Levy, & Ritchie, 2005, p. 329). This notion of brand is further enhanced through a better understanding of the beliefs and perceptions of a place held by potential travelers, which forms a tourist’s destination image (TDI) (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). A strong TDI can contribute to a greater awareness of a destination. The NWT social media features images of place, and research suggests that TDI ultimately influences destination selection (Elliot & Papadopoulos, 2016). If effective, NWT’s use of social media should strengthen their product awareness and destination choice.

The purpose of this case is to assess the mid-point results of the social media campaign against the backdrop of NWT Tourism’s objectives, as well as overall market factors, to uncover insights into not only how it has performed so far, but what it may accomplish by its completion. These insights can be gained by analyzing:

- The attention paid to product in Yellowknife and beyond in the NWT Facebook campaign;
- Which of NWT’s product offerings are generating interest, and which are not; and,
- The overall effectiveness of the social media campaign to build awareness of the NWT brand.

Spectacular Northwest Territories!

NWT Tourism is a non-profit organization funded by the Government of the NWT to market their destination. Their overall goals are threefold: (i) to increase destination awareness; (ii) to promote all tour-

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Figure 1

Number of NWT Tourism Operators by Region



ism sectors; and (iii) to drive traffic to all five regions of NWT. Referring to the map below, the North Slave Region located closest to the capital city of Yellowknife, has a much broader base of tourism operators who are market and trade ready than the other regions.

While NWT Tourism’s marketing must aim to best match potential visitors to tourism products and experiences, NWT Tourism has to avoid a Yellowknife centric focus, balancing consumer demand with political requirements to market the whole territory. “NWT Tourism is proposing a marketing strategy that... will grow the tourism industry, provide economic benefits to all regions of the NWT, and be sustainable for the next five years” (Five Year Marketing Strategy, 2016, p.17). Specifically, NWT Tourism’s strategic objectives are to (Five Year Marketing Strategy, 2016, p.42):

- Increase the visitor spend to \$235 million by 2020
- Strengthen and uphold the Spectacular NWT Brand
- Lead with our best
- Strengthen our partnerships to enhance marketing efforts
- Make digital marketing the centerpiece of all marketing programs
- Strengthen how research and results drive our decision making

Considering market segmentation, the NWT’s Canadian psychographic targets are the Gentle Explorer, Free Spirits, Authentic Experiencers, and Personal History Explorers as categorized and defined by the Canadian Tourism Commission (2008). They aim for the 45+ age, long haul traveler with disposable income over \$150,000/year. By origin, 57% of leisure visitors to the NWT are Canadian, primarily coming to tour or visit friends and family. Asian visitors (Japan, China, and South Korea) make up the second largest group at 28%,

mainly drawn to Aurora viewing. Visitors from the USA, once the mainstay of fishing and hunting, are a distant third at only 8%.

Since the leisure traveler makes up 57% of the total visitors to the NWT (Five Year Marketing Strategy, 2016, p.20), the importance of understanding what draws them to the region is crucial. The six main purposes of leisure travel are identified as: Aurora viewing, fishing, general touring, hunting, outdoor adventure, and visiting friends and relatives. As seen in Table 1, NWT tourism grew 11% in 2015/16 over the previous year, going from 84,810 visitors to 93,910 visitors. Visitor spending rose 14% from \$146.6 million to \$167 million. Interestingly, growth has not been even across activities, and spending patterns vary significantly.

In sum, traditional high-yield experiences such as fishing and hunting are not growing, outdoor adventure has potential but low awareness, and Aurora viewing is significant but facing increased competition from neighboring Yukon and other destinations.

150 Secrets of the North Campaign

Beginning on January 1, 2017, the social media pages of NWT Tourism have posted one Secret a day about the territory, depicting a high quality visual and an appealing description of an experience in which one can engage in should they visit. Just past the mid-point of the campaign, with 80 Secrets revealed on the NWT Facebook page, Cathie wants to know if the campaign is working. The pins on the map (legend in Figure 2) represent the location of the Secrets posted to date, intended to promote all regions of the NWT.

With five regions to promote and six tourism activity categories, the NWT Secrets campaign has a lot to cover. This leads to the question

Table 1

Northwest Territories Visitation Statistics (Sep. 2016)

Northwest Territories Visitation Statistics						
Main Purpose of Travel	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	% Change
Aurora Viewing	7,400	15,700	21,700	16,400	24,300	48%
Fishing ^a	5,100	4,800	5,600	4,300	4,600	8%
General Touring	13,400	15,200	14,800	14,900	19,000	28%
Hunting	480	500	510	510	510	1%
Outdoor Adventure	2,300	3,100	1,900	2,100	2,400	13%
Visiting Friends & Relatives	11,800	13,800	14,100	17,200	12,200	-29%
Total Leisure Visitors	40,480	53,100	58,610	55,410	63,010	14%
Business Travel	24,300	24,100	35,300	29,400	30,900	5%
Total Visitors	64,780	77,200	93,910	84,810	93,910	11%

Northwest Territories Visitor Spending (millions)						
Main Purpose of Travel	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	% Change
Aurora Viewing	\$ 10.2	\$ 15.2	\$ 21.0	\$ 26.8	\$ 39.7	48%
Fishing ^a	\$ 12.9	\$ 11.6	\$ 14.0	\$ 9.3	\$ 9.7	4%
General Touring	\$ 10.9	\$ 12.6	\$ 12.6	\$ 14.0	\$ 19.8	41%
Hunting	\$ 5.5	\$ 5.8	\$ 5.9	\$ 7.1	\$ 7.2	1%
Outdoor Adventure	\$ 5.2	\$ 6.0	\$ 4.1	\$ 6.0	\$ 7.0	17%
Visiting Friends & Relatives	\$ 7.2	\$ 8.4	\$ 8.9	\$ 12.0	\$ 8.5	-29%
Total Leisure Visitors	\$ 51.9	\$ 59.6	\$ 66.5	\$ 75.2	\$ 91.9	22%
Business Travel	\$ 48.5	\$ 48.1	\$ 70.5	\$ 71.4	\$ 75.2	5%
Total Spending (millions)	\$ 100.4	\$ 107.7	\$ 137.0	\$ 146.6	\$ 167.1	14%

Last Update: September 26, 2016. "

a: Methodology and historical data revised in 2016

of whether NWT Tourism is effectively promoting the best drivers of tourism. Table 2 shows all activities being promoted through the social media aspect of the campaign, including ones beyond the six primary categories. The table presents the total number of Likes, Shares, and Comments made by Facebook users, by activity. The final column tallies the total number of posts related to each Secret category.

To reward contest participants with an opportunity to travel to Northwest Territories, a total of 150 'Gold Ticket' winning folders will be distributed throughout the duration of the contest. To win via social media, entrants have to "share" contest Secrets on popular social media platforms including Facebook and Twitter.

The NWT Tourism team is actively engaged in the overall social media component of the campaign. With a daily post for each Secret, along with responses to posted comments by social media users (see below for example), this high level of involvement has helped create a positive buzz and has encouraged followers. At this point in the campaign the Facebook page sits at 80 Secrets, from which much can be concluded in terms of effectiveness at driving interest in the NWT. Many of the comments are from users who indicate their interest in

visiting the region, as in Figure 3.

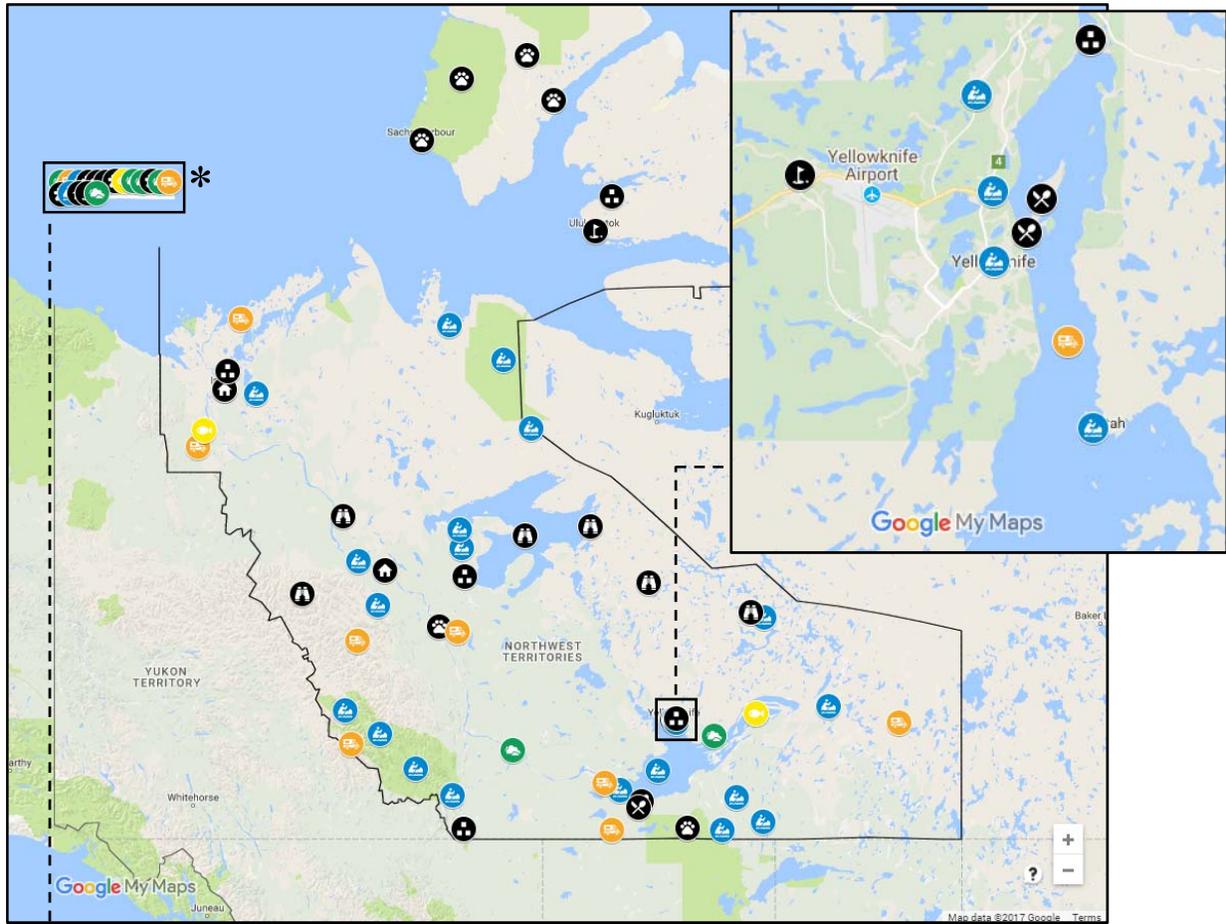
NWT Tourism's Dilemma

Cathie and her team realize the power of their campaign, especially in regard to the impact that social media can have in shaping the brand image of the NWT. Because digital marketing can be continuously analyzed and adjusted, this point in the campaign requires an analysis of responses to the social media posts to determine whether the effort – one post each day and a response to many questions posed by social media users – is impacting awareness. Cathie and the NWT Tourism team must determine whether this aspect of the campaign is meeting its intended purpose. Questions to consider are:

- Overall, do you feel that the campaign is having the desired impact as outlined by the goals of the NWT government? Why or why not?
- At the half way point, do you feel that NWT is focusing their Secrets in the right areas? Discuss your rationale. What changes, if any, would you recommend be made to maximize results?
- List three tourism destination images that come to mind when you think of the Northwest Territories. Does this destination im-

Figure 2

NWT Secrets Pinned Locations



* No location specified in description

Legend of Map Pins

<i>Aurora Viewing</i>	
<i>Fishing</i>	
<i>General Touring</i>	
<i>Hunting</i>	
<i>Outdoor Adventure</i>	
<i>Visiting Friends and Relatives</i>	
<i>Other (see Table 2)</i>	

Table 2

Activities by Type and Social Media Behavior

Table 2 Activity Type	No. of Likes	No. of Shares	No. of Comments	No. of Secrets (Out of 80)
NWT Categories				
<i>Aurora Viewing</i>	3196	489	185	7
<i>Fishing</i>	768	157	53	3
<i>General Touring (e.g., RVing, Scenic driving)</i>	3974	826	288	12
<i>Hunting</i>	0	0	0	0
<i>Outdoor Adventure (e.g., Hiking, Kayaking)</i>	7731	1706	484	25
<i>Visiting Friends and Relatives</i>	0	0	0	0
Other				
<i>Animal Viewing</i>	2873	557	174	11
<i>Aboriginal Tourism (e.g., Dene events, Native heritage)</i>	1440	266	84	6
<i>Landscape Viewing</i>	852	130	45	4
<i>Food and Beverage</i>	1241	533	118	5
<i>Recreational Sports (e.g., Hockey, Golf)</i>	457	148	18	3
<i>Landmark Viewing (e.g., Museums, Churches)</i>	763	224	67	4

age help or hurt their social media campaign? Next, list some ways in which NWT Tourism can better align their social media campaign with the images that you identified in the first part of this question.

- Consider the role that social media has generally on our social behaviour. Thinking about the theory of social presence, can you explain why social networking sites such as Facebook may be a better way to communicate a destination’s campaign versus more traditional media forms such as through television commercials or billboards?
- Conduct a trend analysis on the tables presented in the industry background section. Specifically, which categories increased/decreased, and what do you believe caused these trends based on the information provided?
- What are some categories that NWT should consider expanding

to that are not part of the six that they currently focus on? Are there areas of opportunity to attract a different type of visitor?

- Given the six categories that NWT does currently focus on, which should they consider paying less attention to in lieu of the others? Provide a justification for your response based on the trends and Facebook posts.
- Notice the Secrets without any specific locations on the map. What trend(s) do you see in their popularity given the social media responses to-date?

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Figure 3

Sample Facebook Post and Comments

Northwest Territories Tourism
March 16 · 🌐

Secret #75: Northwest Territories' newest National Park, Naats'ihch'oh, is home to some wicked and wild rivers. This would be an excellent use of your free 2017 Parks Canada Parks Pass
#NWTSecrets

Like · Comment · Share

👍❤️😱 171 Top Comments ▾

28 shares

Write a comment... 🗨️ 📷 📺 🗑️

Looks like fun! I have my pass!! 😊
Like · Reply · 2 · March 16 at 12:08pm

Would love to be in that canoe 😊
Like · Reply · 1 · March 16 at 1:21pm

[View 11 more comments](#)

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