

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

Summary

This case is designed to assess an awareness campaign created by the Northwest Territories (NWT) Tourism marketing organization to build engagement with their Spectacular NWT brand. NWT Tourism launched the Secrets campaign to coincide with Canada’s 150th anniversary, featuring 150 Secrets of the Northwest Territories, posted daily via social media. At just past the campaign mid-point, the location of each Secret is found to reveal certain patterns that, when used in combination with NWT Tourism’s strategic objectives, consumer responses, and visitor trends over a five-year period, can be effectively pieced together to better explain the overall importance of an effective social media campaign in one of Canada’s northern regions. With this, students will be given an opportunity to evaluate NWT Tourism’s practical social media marketing using theoretical concepts in tourism and marketing such as destination brand and tourism destination image.

Learning Outcomes

A key issue in this case is the ability of a destination marketing organization to properly align its strategic objectives with marketing campaign tactics. Specifically, students who complete this case study will be able to:

- Better understand how strategic objectives and campaign elements need to fit together to be successful;
- Apply their understanding of tourism theories and concepts, including tourism destination image, to a practical real-world situation; and
- Conduct trend analyses on reported data and relate results to DMO objectives.

Target Audience

This case could be easily adapted to suit either an undergraduate or a graduate level course. For instance, at the undergraduate level, students could apply concepts of cohesive branding strategies and/or relate the social media content to their own personal experiences. At the graduate level, students could articulate their opinions about the efficacy of managing a multi-media strategy, suggest ways in which NWT Tourism could optimize the implementation, and discuss the political implications faced by government funded destination management organizations.

Theoretical Background

As students will discover through reading the case, the higher the degree of social presence, the greater social influence communicators have on another’s behaviour, known as the theory of social presence (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). When considered alongside the concepts

of tourism destination image (TDI), which comprises the beliefs and perceptions of a place held by potential travelers (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999), students should consider the ways in which one’s perceptions of the Northwest Territories may impact their response to the social media campaign and how theory of social presence, along with relevant concepts within destination branding theory, can be applied.

Summary of Key Learning Theories

The following key learning theories contribute to the foundation of this paper and offer students several areas of potential investigation to determine the campaign’s effectiveness:

Topic	Key Theoretical Foundations	Other concepts to be learned
Social Media	Theory of Social Presence	Social marketing in the 21st century; Web 2.0 design and promotion; Social media and web promotional strategy; Ratio of social media to other forms of advertising engagement; Social media storytelling
Tourism Destination Image	Tourism destination image theory	Using Social Networking Sites to build a destination’s image; Responding to a changing DMO’s image as a result of User Generated Content
Branding and Marketing Communications	Destination branding theory	Management views of branding; DMO practices that encourage travel behavior and intentions; Comparing and contrasting social media with traditional forms of media advertising

Discussion Questions Answered

1. 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? (Learning Outcome #1)

Generally, the campaign did have the desired effect as outlined by the goals of the NWT government since the major areas of interest were depicted in the 80 Secrets posts. However, there were aspects of the activities, such as visiting friends and relatives, which were not featured and could have been better covered in the social media posts.

2. 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? (Learning Outcome #1)

Interest will likely lessen from social media users as the campaign ends and the incentive to post and share is removed. However, NWT Tourism can offset this by continuing to provide interesting

and informative posts. Overall yes, although many of their uncategorized Secrets do reveal some opportunities for growth.

3. *List three tourism destination images that come to mind when you think of the Northwest Territories. Does this destination image 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. (Learning Outcome #2)*

There are not necessarily any “right” or “wrong” answers to this question – however, students are likely to respond that NWT is stereotypically isolated and separated from the rest of Canada due to its geographic location. Some students may choose to describe false stereotypes, such as it always being cold in the north, or everybody living in igloos, as extreme examples. This campaign may help to limit false or negative perceptions due to its ability to connect with Canadians across the country using technology. Some ways in which the image can be modified, therefore, are to continue engaging online with target travelers, as well as maintaining branding and imagery that makes NWT seem familiar in some way.

4. *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? (Learning Outcome #2)*

Because social networking sites such as Facebook are socially driven, they allow for conversations about the campaign that cannot occur through traditional communication sources such as TV ads and billboards. That is – we can disseminate about our desire to visit NWT through a Facebook comment, but we can’t tell the TV set how we feel about the commercial we just saw. This ability to socially deconstruct a campaign as it occurs allows potential visitors to have a dialogue about their plans to visit, which will encourage others to also consider visiting as a result of these strong social cues. Further, students may focus on the opportunities that instant social feedback can have on future posts from the perspective of NWT Tourism.

5. *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? (Learning Outcome #3)*

A trend analysis reveals that visiting friends and family has decreased since last year in both visitation and expenditures. Hunting is also on a very slow increase compared to other categories. Aurora viewing saw a big decrease in 2014, which inflated its growth the year after. Although popular, outdoor

adventure does not generate as much revenue as the other categories. Other observations are also possible from the students, but the important thing is they explain their justification for why those trends occurred based on details from the case (e.g., geographic limitations of certain activities, low shares/likes compared to other categories on social media, etc.)

6. *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? (Learning Outcome #3)*

Animal viewing is the most obvious one, although others have a case as well depending on how much revenue they would bring in to the territory. Regardless of their answers to this question, students should consider the potential economic and social impact of their suggestion – for instance, if they choose Aboriginal Tourism, this may or may not be true, depending on how much interest was generated in this topic through the social media posts. By that measure, then, things like recreational sports are likely not an opportunity for NWT to focus on (with less ‘likes’ than any of the others in this category).

7. *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. (Learning Outcome #3)*

Hunting may be a sensitive topic for social media and is hard to promote without offending certain groups of people. It is harder to measure for this reason, but may also not be as appealing to visitors. NWT could find niche media to promote hunting and see if interest increases. The main point here is that social media may or may not meet the needs of the tourists depending on the topic, and some are best left for other modes of information delivery. Also, visiting friends and relatives does not seem to bring in much tourism revenue and has decreased by 21% over the past 5 years, yet NWT Tourism has not focused on this activity in their Facebook posts, so it looks like they are already consciously not promoting this. Students may observe that perhaps it is a declining category for NWT because it is a challenging form of promotion.

8. *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? (Learning Outcome #3)*

General viewing opportunities seem to be the most popularly promoted ‘non location-specific’ activities, particularly in regard to auroras and animals. With a 48% increase between 2011/12 and 2015/16 in aurora viewings (despite some decreases within these years), this remains an important focus point for the NWT.

Lesson Planning

In any of the following plans, this case is best followed sequentially, revealing the map and map pins early so that the students can begin thinking about the location of the places identified through the social media campaign. It is recommended that this case study be used to help advance classroom discussions around topics of destination branding, social media campaign strategies, and tourism destination image theory. Though multiple approaches are possible, the following instruction designs are suggested based on either individual, team-based, or imaginative role-playing lesson plans:

Individual Lesson Plan (60-70 minutes)

Begin the lesson with a broad discussion about the importance of integration in a marketing campaign. That is, a company or destination's marketing strategy must align with their strategic objectives, and what may happen if they do not. Following this, provide each student with a copy of the case study to examine individually and respond to the discussion questions presented at the end (reading and responding will take the students roughly 40 minutes). Following this, bring students together to discuss their responses, ensuring that the focus on the research objectives remains a priority (20 minutes). Following the entire discussion and once all questions have been satisfactorily answered, inform the students of the exact learning outcomes and summarize with the observation that just as the class has focused on the objectives of the case to answer the questions, that marketers must do the same in order to succeed with their marketing campaigns (10 minutes).

Group Lesson Plan (40-50 minutes)

Just as in the individual lesson plan, begin with a discussion about the importance of integration in a marketing campaign and the importance of aligning with a marketers' strategic objectives. Introduce the NWT Tourism case study to the class, as well as any relevant additional readings from below. After distributing a case to each group, there will be 20 minutes allotted to each team in order to think through and respond to the discussion questions at the end. The discussion questions are directly tied to the learning outcomes in this teaching note, and so an effective response by the teams will indicate their level of comprehension of the expected outcomes described there. For sample responses to the questions as well as to see which learning outcome they address, please see 'Discussion Question Answers' section in this teaching note.

Once the students have prepared their responses, spend 20 minutes with the entire class at once presenting their responses, ensuring that the discussion remains focused on resolving that questions' specific learning outcome. Following this, as in the individual lesson, inform the students of the exact learning outcomes and summarize with the observation that just as the class has focused on the objectives of the case to

answer the questions, that marketers must do the same in order to succeed with their marketing campaigns (10 minutes).

Role Playing Plan (50-60 minutes)

Depending on the size of the class and the level of imaginative role-playing the course allows, there is a third option which uses a situational role-play in lieu of a traditional form/discuss/present model. Here, have the students form into a total of 6 groups, where each group represents a different activity as described by NWT Tourism: Aurora viewing, fishing, general touring, hunting, outdoor adventure, and visiting friends & relatives. Within the groups, students will be asked to play the role of Cathie Bolstad's Marketing Team, with the instructor playing the role of Cathie herself. The role-play exercise is simple: each team will have a total of 25 minutes to create support for their activity and why it deserves attention from Cathie in her budget and implementation in her social media campaign.

To support their activity, students may choose a number of creative ways to encourage 'Cathie' to give priority to their team's activity. Some ideas include filling out a pre-made map of NWT with key locations where their activity takes place, forecasting trends in visitation and expenditures into the future, designing their own Facebook Secrets post to demonstrate that activity's appeal to potential tourists, and more. By the end of the initial preparation, 'Cathie' will then invite each team to present their efforts to her. This phase is expected to take 30 minutes (6 groups with 5 minutes per group). By the end, 'Cathie' will determine which campaign activity will receive the most from Cathie's budget and be the focus of her social media campaign (5 minutes).

Homework Assignments

Although not a requirement for instructors, it may be beneficial to have students think about drafting some stronger connections between practice and theory. If that is the case, there is a good opportunity to provide the students with a 'thought paper' homework assignment, in which they consider their responses to the discussion questions and what the implications might be for the Secrets campaign. Students can then write a one-page report on what they believe the end of the campaign will look like in two scenarios: (1) NWT Tourism responds to the suggestions they provide, and (2) NWT Tourism does not. Simply writing 'they will succeed' or 'they will fail' is not enough – the students must attach their summaries to the learning outcomes described in this teaching note, and ensure that at least some of their answer addresses tourism and marketing theoretical concepts as well as practical ones.

Additional Readings

Instructors can prepare for the lesson ahead of time by referring to the documents below. Once the case analysis is complete, students are also encouraged to think beyond the case, especially in determin-

ing whether the total campaign was indeed successful for NWT:

NWT Industry, Tourism and Investment (<http://www.iti.gov.nt.ca/en>)

NWT Tourism Secrets Campaign website (<http://spectacularnwt.com/secrets>)

Kawasaki, G., & Fitzpatrick, P. (2014). *The Art of Social Media: Power Tips for Power Users*. Penguin.

Kerpen, D. (2015). *Likeable Social Media, Revised and Expanded: How to Delight Your Customers, Create an Irresistible Brand, and Be Amazing on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Pinterest, and More*. McGraw Hill Professional.

Vaynerchuk, G. (2013). *Jab, jab, jab, right hook: How to tell your story in a noisy social world*. Harper Business.

Baloglu, S., & McCleary, K. W. (1999). A model of destination image formation. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 26(4), 868-897.

Lange-Faria, W. & Elliot, S. (2012). Understanding the role of social media in destination marketing. *Tourism: An International Multidisciplinary Journal of Tourism*, 7(1), 193-211.

References

Baloglu, S., & McCleary, K. W. (1999). A model of destination image formation. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 26(4), 868-897.

Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media. *Business Horizons*, 53(1), 59-68.