

Case Study:
How the Costa Rican Tourism Board Has Manufactured a Top Travel Destination
MEJO 531 Final Exam
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Part 1: Synopsis

Organizational Mission:

The Costa Rican Tourism Board (ICT) is the governing tourism board in Costa Rica. Since the construction of the first private hotel in 1930, ICT has been in charge of enforcing regulations, implementing tourism development plans, improving management practices, attracting investors, and generating comprehensive marketing strategies. ICT's mission is to strengthen tourism through public policy, projects, alliances, and programs that encourage pleasant stay for tourists while continuously improving living standards for Costa Ricans. They also strive for competitiveness, sustainability, equity, solidarity through their legislative and communication practices. The ICT has objectives of guaranteeing a sustainable tourism development model through innovation, workforce development, effective public management, and creating new opportunities for tourism ("About Us", 2021).

Background:

In an attempt to improve their struggling economy, ICT previously launched four international campaigns to promote tourism in North America. The first campaign was a 1997 promotional entitled "No Artificial Ingredients", which was seen as a success to tourists but viewed as hypocritical by locals. The second campaign was the 2011 promotional giveaway contest "Gift of Happiness", which offered \$1 million worth of vacation packages (Zúñiga, 2019). This campaign gained lots of internet attention for the use of an animated sloth, along with earned media and celebrity endorsements from Anderson Cooper and Kristen Bell. "Gift of Happiness" was also seen as a success as the Costa Rica Minister of Tourism Allan Flores noted significant annual growth in tourism figures (Lopez, 2012). In 2014, the "Save the Americans/Canadians" video campaign targeted overworked people from these countries looking for an escape. This target audience was people who had a high interest in visiting, which was determined to be experienced travelers, committed to sustainability, with high income and education levels (Araya, 2020). This parodical campaign earned multiple awards and garnered the attention of its target audience, once again increasing tourism rates for the following year. In 2017, ICT expanded its tourism efforts to Europe through the "My Choice, Naturally" campaign. They partnered with the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and CNN International to frame Costa Rica as the destination for authentic travel experiences. Their campaign video was awarded Best Production at Termatalia, the world's most notable wellness tourism fair, which is known to be a point of contact between Europe and the Americas. The success of this campaign reinforced their competitive edge against other countries' tourism efforts and cemented their position within a high-end tourism market (Alvarado, 2017).

Campaign Objectives, Research, and Programming:

The ICT's current tourism campaign is "Only the Essentials". In the midst of a COVID economy, this international campaign aims to promote tourism from both the United States and Canada over the next two years. This tourism campaign was launched in September 2019 as part of the country's job creation and economic growth plan. Tourism represents 8.2% of Costa Rica's GDP and represents 8.8% of the country's total employment, existing as the primary source of income for thousands of families ("Costa Rica seeks to position itself as the perfect destination", 2020).

ICT hired American marketing agency MMGY to lead research on target audiences. MMGY analyzed ICT's research and collected their own data to determine consumer motivations and define the personas of those who would be interested in traveling to Costa Rica ("The Architecture of a Brand Campaign", 2019). 65% of the country's visitors at the beginning of 2019 were from the United States and Canada, leading ICT to focus its efforts on appealing to publics from these countries. MMGY then held eight focus group sessions (split between Montreal, Toronto, New York, and Los Angeles) to gain insights on target markets, tastes, and preferences. ICT also hired Costa Rican video producer Luz Marina to film landscapes around the country ("Costa Rica seeks to position itself as the perfect destination", 2020).

"Only the Essentials" manifested as a campaign introducing travelers to Costa Rica's brand through reconnecting them with nature and highlighting the country's opportunity for unique experiences. They are offering the opportunity to go back to the essentials and form personal connections with what really matters in life: nature, wellness, culture, and adventure ("Costa Rica seeks to position itself as the perfect destination", 2020). The campaign created visual pieces using five keywords to convey their message: balance, thrill, recharge, alive, and connect. The campaign is active in large urban cities across the US and Canada, with key markets identified as New York, Chicago, Dallas, and Toronto ("Costa Rica Launches 'Only the Essentials' Campaign", 2019). ICT put advertisements on billboards and public transportation, along with digital and print media, social media partnerships with magazines, bloggers, and tourism organizations, and search engine placement ("Costa Rica seeks to position itself as the perfect destination", 2020). ICT also held an event in New York's Brookfield Place as an immersive exhibit allowing people to walk through the sights and sounds of a Costa Rican rainforest ("Costa Rica Launches 'Only the Essentials' Campaign", 2019).

President Carlos Alvarado Quesada is a leading voice in the movement. Since tourism drives the country's economy, the president is trying to make sure that this industry aligns with the country's sustainability goals ("The Architecture of a Brand Campaign", 2019). This country branding is backed by a multi-institutional vision and participation from governmental authorities engaging with key messages and slogans. ICT engages with Costa Rican ambassadors abroad to promote this campaign internationally ("Daniel Valverde on Costa Rica's Branding Strategy", 2020).

Within the "Only the Essentials" campaign, ICT's overall objective was to increase tourism from the United States and Canada. Within each public, ICT had these specific objectives:

Consumers: ICT wants to gain attention from Americans and Canadians who are experienced travelers, committed to sustainability, have high income and education levels. ICT wants this group to view Costa Rica as the best place to connect with nature and engage in experiences unique to the country.

Internal Political Stakeholders: ICT wants other Costa Rican government authorities to align with their campaign and promote their message. ICT wants the internal political stakeholders to see how this tourism campaign would help Costa Rica achieve the goals outlined in their job creation and economic growth plan.

Media and Other Partner Organizations: ICT wants to build a strong relationship and positive reputation with digital media outlets, travel magazines, blogs, and tourism organizations to increase their media presence and be endorsed as a top travel destination.

By the end of 2019, the “Only the Essentials” campaign successfully increased international air arrivals by 5%, received coverage in international media reports and articles, reached 324 journalists, and strengthened the image of Costa Rica as a top travel destination (Rico, 2020).

Part 2: Analysis

1. *You must have strong relationships with your internal publics to gain support from external publics.*

When it comes to the strategic planning phase of a communications plan, it is essential to understand the attitudes and beliefs of all your internal publics. These internal publics can be other leaders in your organization, influencers, employees, and people influenced by internal changes. Strong internal relationships help organizations ensure that all internal members are on the same page and promote a cohesive brand message to the external publics.

1a. Find and develop relationships with local opinion leaders.

To resonate with external publics, you must make sure internal influencers are on the same page and have developed relationships with opinion leaders. In the Marburg virus case, local Angolans were not receptive to health messaging recommendations from foreign medical personnel because the locals had no relationship with these health workers. To build trust with the Angolan villagers, the WHO worked with community leaders, healers, and midwives to convince locals of the importance of adhering to the health recommendations. Once the local community leaders aligned their message with the WHO, the Angolan villagers were more receptive to the health messaging and began to trust the foreign medical personnel. Therefore, building relationships with local opinion leaders helped the WHO drive a cohesive message, earn trust, and gain support from the local villagers as external publics (Swann, 2020).

In the Costa Rica case, the ICT realized the importance of aligning their key messages with the Presidency of the Republic and national ambassadors located abroad. Because the president and government receive tremendous support from Costa Rican citizens and other national governments, any message they promote will receive tremendous support from the Costa Rican tourism industry and foreign tourists as external publics (“Daniel Valverde on Costa Rica’s Branding Strategy”, 2020). Because ICT developed a strong relationship with other governmental organizations, they are consequently able to promote tourism and gain support from more publics if the campaign messaging is coming from as many sources as possible. Both the Angolan Marburg virus case and the ICT campaign illustrate how developing relationships with local opinion leaders helps expand your messaging potential to external publics. You will be more likely to gain external support with endorsement from influential leaders.

1b. If your internal publics are on the same page, your overall message will be more cohesive and consistent.

Once internal relationships are established, organizations have a better idea of internal sentiment and how internal publics will share this message with external publics. Having strong relationships helps the organization see that their internal publics are on the same page and sharing a cohesive message. In the Susan G. Komen case, Planned Parenthood released a statement that they were upset with Komen for cutting financial support. The Komen responses were seen as inconsistent and, externally, made the company look like they did not have a cohesive message. Therefore, Komen lost support from external publics because they did not have a cohesive internal identity that they could lean on during a crisis (Swann, 2020).

In contrast, ICT ensures that all governmental authorities agree about the benefits of increased tourism on the economy and job market. All officials from the presidency to foreign diplomats agree about the importance of promoting tourism, and this consistency is received positively by external stakeholders, tourists, and travel organizations alike (“Daniel Valverde on Costa Rica’s Branding Strategy”, 2020).

Ultimately, successful organizations see the importance of developing and maintaining strong relationships with internal publics. Relationships with internal publics, whether they be opinion leaders or other internal stakeholders, will translate to trust and support from external publics. External entities look for a cohesive and consistent brand image before trusting an organization or supporting their mission. You will have a higher chance of gaining external support if you have internal support and consistent beliefs.

2. The importance of market research.

Market research is an important aspect of the strategic planning phase of communication. This research can be done by analyzing data collected in the past or surveying new groups of people. Archival research can help organizations learn from the past to determine what will work in the future. Conducting new research helps you get to know your audience and understand the publics most interested in your product. Successful market research creates insights to help you envision your target audience and develop the most efficient and effective campaign.

2a. The past can help you determine what will work in the future.

The successes and failures of the past are often strong indicators of what will work in the future. Analyzing similar campaigns can help companies avoid repeating mistakes from the past. When the Cleveland Clinic was about to conduct the first near-total face transplant in the US, they knew that it would be a very controversial procedure. There was potential for lots of negative media attention because a French hospital had received lots of negative publicity when conducting the same surgery before. The Cleveland Clinic media relations team learned from the communications mistakes in France, making sure they retained control of the narrative and eliminating the possibility for ethical debate. In this case, researching a past situation helped the Cleveland Clinic avoid communications mistakes and frame the procedure exactly as they wanted to (Swann, 2020).

With “Only the Essentials” being ICT’s 5th international campaign, they have learned from responses about past campaign mistakes. The 1997 “No Artificial Ingredients” campaign was viewed as hypocritical by locals, saying that the ICT sells an image of being 100% natural when they realistically have a big pesticide issue. The “Gift of Happiness” campaign was successful but lacked the depth and continued programming to hold onto the media attention they

garnered from the giveaways. The third and fourth campaigns used marketing agencies to hone in on a target audience and use modern technology to highlight the natural beauty through landscape videos (Zúñiga, 2019). The “Only the Essentials” campaign successfully avoided criticism and used the insights from their past campaigns to reach their target consumers successfully. The Cleveland Clinic and ICT show how information from the past can help your organization determine strategies that will be successful and avoid pitfalls along the way.

2b. Insights help you envision people most likely to be interested in your product.

Conducting market research helps organizations understand who their target audience should be and who will be interested in their mission, product, or service. The US Potato Board conducted research and created a composite person to understand and visualize their key demographics. Linda helped the marketing team understand consumer attributes and behaviors that led to potato purchases. Once the USPB conducted their market research, they gained insights allowing them to target their marketing efforts toward the “Linda’s” who were most interested in their product (Swann, 2020).

ICT similarly used insights to get a better idea of their target audience. From previous campaigns, they knew that the majority of their international tourists come from the US and Canada. They hired the marketing agency MMGY to hold eight focus group sessions in large cities across both countries to gain insights into people’s tastes and preferences (“Costa Rica seeks to position itself as the perfect destination”, 2020). From these, MMGY determined that the people most interested in visiting Costa Rica are experienced travelers with high income and education levels. They are also committed to sustainability and were looking for an escape from their work-life (Araya, 2020). Market research allowed ICT to get a very specific idea of their target audience.

Researching past cases allows companies to learn from the mistakes of others and determine how to be successful in the future. Market research always provides insights into who you should target your messaging toward and who will be most receptive to your mission. Therefore, market research is a very important element of the strategic planning process and maximizing success for future communications campaigns.

3. *The optics can and will tell the narrative.*

Campaign perception is much more than the content of the message. Public perception of a marketing campaign can be influenced by other factors like the types of people involved and the location of a video or an event. When an organization chooses to put a face behind a campaign, people can see themselves in those characters and relate to the message, making it more intriguing. The setting of events can also introduce other elements of culture and evoke sensations that influence the reception of your message. Whether it is through people or places, external optics will influence public perception and interpretation.

3a. Putting a face behind the campaign makes it relatable and draws interest.

When companies put a face behind a campaign, consumers can see themselves in these characters, and the campaign becomes more relatable. When these faces are relatable, people are more willing to empathize and accept the narrative the organization is promoting. After the

Deepwater Horizon oil spill, BP released video commercials of Gulf Coast residents talking about BP's efforts to help their communities. These videos received hundreds of thousands of views as publics were emotionally compelled to hear their stories. Because of the videos' wide reach, BP was able to frame some of the discussion around their response. This attention further shows that including people in the campaign drew enough human interest that BP could control the narrative (Swann, 2020).

ICT similarly utilized human interest to relate to their target audience and draw attention. This first happened in the "Gift of Happiness" campaign when they announced giveaway winners publicly (like on the Anderson Cooper show). When people see that others are winning, the prize becomes tangible and draws interest in others to participate. In the "Save the Americans/Canadians" campaign, ICT used images of overworked people needing an escape to attract similar people who relate to their message. Finally, ICT used the "My Choice, Naturally" and "Only the Essentials" campaigns to depict people connecting with nature and others in life-changing experiences. ICT's target audience of people who love traveling would see themselves in these stories, making them relatable and drawing interest (Zúñiga, 2019). Including people in these stories helps people visualize themselves as part of the narrative, which leads to increased interest. Both cases illustrate how humanizing a campaign makes it more relatable, draws interest from consumers, and allows companies to control the narrative as they desire.

3b. Create events where the location can be part of the story.

When trying to control the narrative of a campaign, the location can say so much about the mission, organization, product, and place. Paychex, Inc., took advantage of this opportunity at their Investor Day by providing a cultural view of the company at their Rochester, NY headquarters. They knew that the location would sell the narrative, so they extended the day into an overnight experience with multiple meal-related events. The event was a huge success and gained tremendous support from investors and internal management. By turning their investor day into a more intimate event at their headquarters, investors bought into the company culture and built a personal relationship with the company. In this way, the location became a large part of the story and helped tell the narrative of Paychex, Inc., as a whole (Swann, 2020).

ICT had a pop-up event at Brookfield Place in New York City to launch the "Only the Essentials" campaign. The event was an immersive exhibit drawing on atmospheric sights and sounds of a Costa Rican rainforest, along with plants, lighting, and wind effects. The event was meant to bring a piece of Costa Rica to target audiences to learn more about the environment than what is on paper. This immersive exhibit added to the narrative of Costa Rica and highlighted the unique elements of nature that one could experience visiting that country ("Costa Rica Launches 'Only the Essentials' Campaign", 2019).

People and locations have tremendous potential to help an organization tell a narrative. Adding faces to a campaign makes the story relatable, draws emotions, and adds intrigue to a message. Places can add to a narrative by drawing on other senses to evoke a feeling in publics. Ultimately, organizations can use both of these tools to create a more compelling message.

4. *Make your messaging simple and specific.*

The message has the potential to make or break a campaign. Marketing messages aim to resonate with the greatest amount of people possible. The best way to do so is by making sure

they are easy to understand. Some of the best ways to make a message resonate with people are through keeping them simple and making them specific to certain target audiences.

4a. The simplest messages often say the most.

The most powerful messages are often the ones that use the least number of words. Simple messages are easy to remember and comprehend across several audiences. When Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) had a chicken shortage in UK and Irish stores due to vendor issues, people were very upset, and KFC needed to come up with an apology response that matched their brand and desired tone. They responded with an image of an empty chicken bucket with the logo rearranged to spell “FCK”. Consumers received the response well, the graphic went viral, and media outlets commended the witty and effective response. The simple message was easy to understand and appealed to customers with a lighthearted comical tone. This image appeared as earned media in 700 press articles and TV segments, giving KFC endless positive feedback and delivering their message in a simple but efficient way (Swann, 2020).

ICT similarly utilized the power of simplicity through their “Only the Essentials” ads. The ad campaign relied on visual pieces using five keywords to convey their entire message. Balance, thrill, recharge, alive, and connect were the words ICT felt summarized their entire campaign and defined the experiences available in Costa Rica. Natural elements and animals shaped these words to connect the keywords to the rainforest (“Costa Rica Launches ‘Only the Essentials’ Campaign”, 2019). Although the message was simple, ICT said what they needed to and resonated with their publics. The KFC and ICT campaigns support the idea that organizations should go with the simplest message.

4b. More specific messages have a greater chance of appealing to niche audiences.

One broad message might reach many people, but many specific messages have the potential to attract high interest while still reaching many publics. The city of Salem, Massachusetts, has been trying to expand its tourism beyond October by highlighting their maritime history and historic architecture throughout the town. To attract people to these niche interests, Salem created specific sales packages for different activities, including sailing, foodie tours, family experiences, and more. These packages have more specific marketing messages that still fall under the larger umbrella of visiting Salem. Specific marketing messages appeal to more niche audiences and attract tourists that come to Salem for more than just their witchcraft reputation (Swann, 2020).

ICT has also used messaging targeting specific groups of people to increase appeal towards target audiences. Through their “Save the Americans/Canadians” campaign, ICT appealed specifically to people feeling overworked and felt like they needed a relaxing escape. In their “My Choice, Naturally” campaign, they used a neuroscientist to discuss the sense of well-being and happiness that she experiences in Costa Rica. Most recently, the “Only the Essentials” campaign targeted people looking to slow down their lives and reconnect with nature. All these campaigns target specific people, all falling under the larger umbrella of their target audience, with the same overarching message that they should visit Costa Rica. Both these campaigns illustrate how if your organization reaches out to specific groups, you might appeal to more people than if you were to use a more general message (Zúñiga, 2019).

Ultimately, simplifying messages will help consumers easily remember the campaign and make it more palatable to audiences. Specifying content will also make messages appear more intentional and increase the chances that consumers will respond if it appeals to them directly. Since messaging is at the core of every PR campaign, companies should use specificity and simplicity to ensure that their messages resonate with target audiences and maximize their appeal.

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