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Destination Marketer Zooms in on China

TOURISM: New effort comes after test run last year
PAUL HUGHES

Monday, March 14, 2016

The Orange County Visitors Association plans to expand a 2015 marketing effort with Ctrip, the largest online travel agency in China, in a year of Web- and mobile efforts to pull travelers from that country to hotels, shopping, entertainment and other venues here.

The program includes an Orange County Web page on Ctrip for hotel bookings and travel packages, and mobile, email and social media marketing.

OCVA tested an offering last year from May to December with 20 Orange County hotels; Disneyland Resort; the direct marketing groups for Anaheim/Garden Grove, Newport Beach and Costa Mesa; the South Coast Plaza, Fashion Island, and Irvine Spectrum Center shopping centers; and other groups, at a cost of about \$600,000.

It paid \$100,000 of that, and individual participants kicked in, along with U.S. national destination marketer Brand USA and Shanghai-based Ctrip.com International Ltd., said OCVA Chief Executive Ed Fuller.

Fuller said the expanded work is scheduled to run through next March, including the Chinese New Year on Jan. 28, and will cost \$700,000 to \$800,000. OCVA will pay about \$150,000 of that, he said.

“Our commitment is up significantly. Last year was a test, and this year is a full thrust.”

Build on Benefits

The 2015 program “reached more than 104 million Chinese consumers and generated more than 3,200 hotel room nights for Orange County,” said Doug McClain, senior vice president and chief marketing officer at destination marketing organization Newport Beach & Co.

The results are a 1,448% increase over the 208 rooms the original 20 hotels booked on Ctrip’s site in 2014 without the benefit of the 2015 program’s OC-focused landing page and other marketing elements.

This year’s participant roster has more than doubled.

About 50 hotels and three additional destination marketers—in Huntington Beach, Laguna Beach and Buena Park—are in, along with Disneyland and Brand USA. Ctrip (see box, this page) will again foot some of the bill.

Fuller said the expansion has spread the program across the county.

“We had good participation along the coast last year. This year there are more hotels from Anaheim and other cities, and the additional DMOs.”

Brent McNally, general manager of Kimpton Shorebreak Hotel in Huntington Beach, a new participant, said in an email that such programs offer “access to key foreign markets and inbound tour operators that individual hotels exhaust a lot of resources trying to engage.”

This year’s website will have 20 travel packages—up from 10—and “foodie” photos from 15 to 20 restaurants.

“The Chinese love food, so we have food pictures,” Fuller said. “It’s strictly a teaser [that] builds awareness.”

Individual Attention

Fuller said this year’s focus is FIT—a hospitality industry term for “frequent individual travelers”—from China.

“About 40% of Chinese travel to the U.S. is individual, and we’ve seen a dramatic increase the past few years. It’s the quality of traveler we want to bring here: people who stay longer and spend more money.”

Fairmont Newport Beach Business Travel Sales Manager Andrew Pujale said the hotel—a participant both years—“saw a marked increase in Chinese visitors” during last year’s program.

“Most beneficial is what the hotel and staff have learned ... to cater to this clientele,” he said.

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The hotel has begun offering travelers slippers and tea kettles, and Chinese television and newspapers in guest rooms.

“When you have a whole country as a market, it’s always significant, but this helped us focus on the task.”

Pujalet said Fairmont is adding technological elements so it can more precisely track results of the Ctrip program.

Fuller said OCVA is testing a similar new program this year on China’s second largest travel website, called Tuniu.

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