

ADVOCACY IN THE FACE OF IDEOLOGY

In a 2015 Skift article entitled *The Secret to Bigger Destination Marketing Budgets*, the author suggests that, “Although funding remains a constant challenge for destination marketing organizations, several leaders in the industry are learning that the key to a bigger budget lies is measurement.” In the same article, Don Welsh, then CEO of Choose Chicago, stated, “The organizations that are much more prudent and demonstrate ROI are the ones that will continue to get funding.”

For years, this has been the industry mantra: proving the economic value of tourism marketing is critical to attracting more funding. And for good reason. As Don emphasizes in the article, “Everything that a destination marketing organization does with taxpayer money has to be measurable.”



Yet over the past year, destinations across the United States have had their funding attacked, regardless of their ability to demonstrate a positive ROI. The president’s fiscal 2018 budget called for the elimination of Brand USA, despite the agency being responsible for adding \$8.9 billion to the U.S. economy last year—a 27-to-1 return. Visit Florida also found their funding under attack, even with an ROI study demonstrating that for

every \$1 that Florida spends in destination marketing, the state gets \$3.20 in increased tax revenue. The Missouri Division of Tourism demonstrated an ROI of \$91 to \$1 in 2015, yet this year had their budget cut in half by the incoming governor!

So, what gives? Why are destinations who seem to be proving the economic value of funding continuing to have their funding challenged? SMARInsights recently conducted research amongst political leaders and residents to help answer that question. They found that political leaders are often inundated with ROI studies from multiple industries and sectors, diluting the impact of data from our industry. They also discovered that while politicians are beginning to understand the economic impact of tourism in communities, it’s the need for promotion that they continue to struggle with. As Tourism New Zealand CEO Kevin Bowler stated, “I don’t think policy makers struggle to understand the economic value of tourism. They struggle with understanding the additional value that a destination marketing organization brings to the industry.” This sentiment is showcased in a tweet from incoming Florida House Speaker Jose Oliva: “Tourism existed long before gov’t involvement. Year-round sun and beaches is what made it happen.”

How can this statement be made when Visit Florida has demonstrated a \$3.20 increase in tax revenue for every \$1 they spend? The answer can be found in another statement given by Representative Oliva, “I can tell you that so long as we keep our principles and our values and our ideology in line, no matter what comes our way, we’ll be able to navigate it.” The key word here is ideology. Government spending on tourism promotion flies in the face of Representative Oliva’s “free market” ideology, as he defines it.

The disturbing fact for any destination organization in the state of Florida is that this deep-rooted ideology actually makes the representative less likely to believe data demonstrating the success of their efforts. And it’s not because of stubbornness; it’s a psychological

phenomenon known as cognitive dissonance, which occurs when individuals are confronted with new information that contradicts their beliefs, ideals and values. People see evidence that disagrees with them as weaker, because ultimately, they're asking themselves fundamentally different questions when evaluating that evidence, depending on whether they want to believe what it suggests or not. Or, as some put it, "minds don't want to change."



This ideology that calls for a strictly limited role for government is being pushed heavily across the country by well-funded organizations such as Americans for Prosperity, and no ROI study alone is going to effectively combat it. Instead, this battle must also be fought on the ideological front, which calls for a unified ideological case for destination promotion.

Combatting Ideology

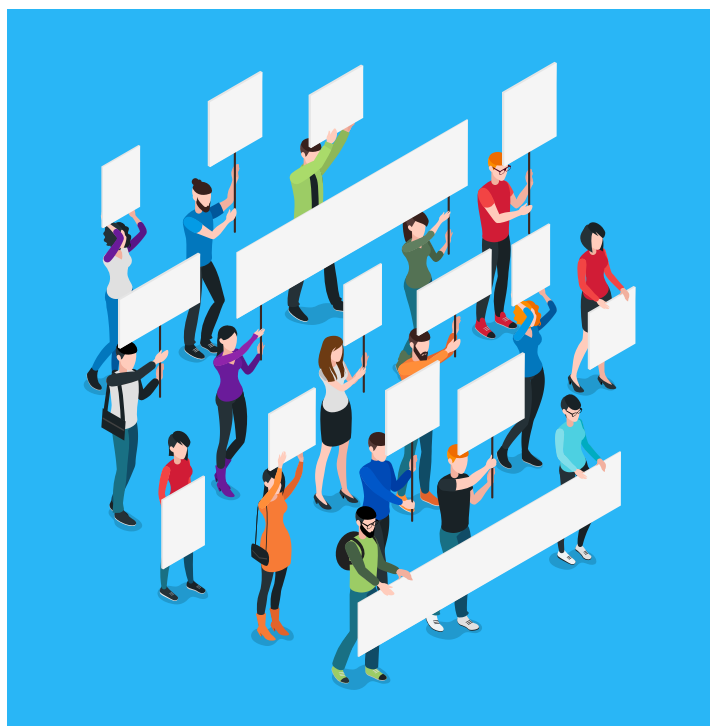
So, what would get someone to change their mind about a belief that is deeply tied to their identity? "Probably nothing," says Carol Tavis, a social psychologist and co-author of *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts*. "I mean that seriously," she says.

There's no doubt that changing a person's core beliefs is difficult. But there are methods to sway politicians and constituents who believe destination promotion goes against their core beliefs.

1. **Make sure they understand what you do:** People tend to hold more extreme positions on complex policies when they don't know very much about them, according to a research article in the academic journal *Psychological Science*. Having people attempt to explain how the policies work is

enough to reduce their sense of certainty, as well as the extremity of their political positions. This can often be an issue for destination organizations, as political leaders, stakeholders and residents often do not fully understand the work that we do. Therefore, it is imperative that you clearly convey the efforts of your organization and what they mean for your community.

2. **Use common language:** LGBTQ+ groups in America won over voters by discussing their quest for equality not in aggressive demands for equal rights, but with language conservatives would refer to when describing their own marriages: love, commitment and family. Similarly, The Association for Psychological Science found that talking about climate change in terms of "purity" and "sanctity" of Earth could win over those with conservative morals, traditionally unconcerned with climate change. Talking about destination promotion in terms of "economic prosperity" and "quality of life" for all residents is most likely to resonate with this audience.
3. **Activating Constituents:** Contact with constituencies and voters, and strong, confident dissenting voices from within their own parties, can be balancing forces. The ability to effectively motivate and mobilize constituents to support your efforts is critical to any advocacy initiative. This is another area where ROI studies fall short. Political opinions are based on emotion, not reason, and therefore having your own ideological argument is often the most successful way to rally support.



The Ideological Case for Destination Promotion

The devotion of members is the biggest asset to any advocacy organization, even more so than funding. Successful advocacy campaigns are able to create this devotion by tapping into what advertising guru David Ogilvy called the power of one “big idea.” For our industry, this idea should be that communities who do not invest in destination promotion will be left behind, losing ground economically and in the quality of life for their citizens.

The typical message that comes from industry leaders is that when a destination markets itself effectively, everything from local businesses to public services and residents win. This message, while valid, often fails to establish that emotional connection and sense of urgency required to activate constituents. Talking about the negative consequences on inaction however, creates that urgency and taps into community pride, something that is essential for garnering support from your community.

This argument has been made so effectively on behalf of Brand USA. As Jim Murren, Chairman and CEO of MGM Resorts International, eloquently states, “The world is in the midst of a global travel boom. America cannot afford to lose our rightful share of that market to our competitors.” It was this very argument, in fact, that was used to motivate Congress sign the Travel Promotion Act into law in 2010.

One critical aspect of this argument is the willingness to shed light on industry failures. It’s easier to talk about the United States losing market share when there was no destination organization representing the country. What if there had been? Destinations are all too willing to highlight their successes. We’re constantly overwhelmed with stories of recording breaking visitation. But we often sweep under the rug our shortcomings. In making the argument that without destination promotion a community will be left behind, it’s critical to point out areas of disappointment, and to make the case that more investment is needed to ensure this does not happen again.

The reality is that this concept applies not only to the visitor economy but to all facets of economic activity. As policy advisor Simon Anholt suggests, “In today’s globalized, networked world, every place has to compete with every other place for its share of the world’s consumers, tourists, businesses, investment, capital, respect and attention. Cities, the economic and cultural powerhouses of nations, are increasingly the focus of this international competition for funds, talent and fame.” We’re not just competing for visitors anymore. We’re also competing for talent, investment and business; and destination promotion is critical in driving each of these. This concept needs to be engrained into the minds of stakeholders within your community.

As Resonance Consultancy points out in their *U.S. Place Equity Index Report*, “As developed economies have shifted from a manufacturing orientation to services, physical location has become less important in determining the economic success of not only cities but also states and countries. Today, it is increasingly quality of place that determines where talent, capital and tourism flows. Increasingly, reputation, identity and the perceived quality of place determine where talent, capital and tourism flow.”

Destination organizations are uniquely positioned to act as the community stewards of this reputation and identity. As Maura Gast, Executive Director of the Irving CVB states, “If you build a place where people want to visit, you’ll build a place where people want to live. And, if you build a place where people want to live, you’ll build a place where people have to work. If you build a place where people want to work, you’ll build a place where business wants to be. It all starts with a visit and the visit starts with us.”



Longwoods International’s “Halo Effect” research demonstrates how tourism promotion campaigns lift not only visitation but also improve public perceptions of the destination as a place to live, attend school, start a career or business, or purchase a home. When combined with an actual visit, the impact of tourism marketing on all these activities was even more magnified.

This competitive environment is a reality of our times, and how a destination claims and communicates its distinctive place within it largely decides which destinations succeed and which falter in the race for economic prosperity. **For this reason, we believe destination promotion is a public good for the benefit and well-being of all; an essential investment no community can afford to abate without causing detriment to the community’s future economic and social well-being.**

“Advocacy in the Face of Ideology” was underwritten in part by the Destinations International Foundation.