

Selling the Great Barrier Reef:  
TAA Market Strategies

by

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The theme of this workshop is tourism and the Great Barrier Reef and I am presenting a paper on the specific topic "Selling the Great Barrier Reef - Market Strategies".

Let me begin by making two provocative assertions:

Firstly, the least of our worries is selling the Great Barrier Reef.

Secondly, in the context of the workshop theme the topic is indicative of a clear lack of understanding of the relationship between some regions of Queensland and their potential tourist markets and the relationship between the Great Barrier Reef and tourism.

This lack of understanding has led to muddled thinking in tourist marketing for Queensland and has contributed to inhibiting the rate of growth of some segments of the Queensland tourist industry, particularly those regions near to the Great Barrier Reef.

At this point I would like to clarify two things:

- (i) My remarks are directed primarily at the tourist regions in close proximity to the Great Barrier Reef, in particular the offshore resorts.
- (ii) At the outset it is important to make clear the distinction between the Australian and the overseas market. The reasons for this distinction will, hopefully, become obvious as I proceed.

The heart of my accusation of a "lack of understanding", gets down to the fundamentals of marketing, the importance of distinguishing between the needs of potential consumers and the appeals of the available products.

I plan to illustrate my point by sharing with you TAA's experience in marketing those regions of North Queensland in the proximity of the Reef, particularly the offshore islands, over the last 20 years.

TAA initiated a major marketing strategy in 1959 - the aim of that strategy was to maximise TAA's growth and market share of what it saw to be a high potential growth market - Australian holiday travel.

During the 60's we set about establishing a nation-wide network of holiday travel offices, staffed by specially trained holiday travel consultants. We developed a range of packaged holidays combining air transport and the best of available tourist facilities at Australia's major holiday destinations. We initiated national advertising and promotional campaigns both in our own right and in conjunction with local operators to develop sales of these "holiday products".

Naturally, the "Great Barrier Reef" featured as a star destination and we followed the tradition of adopting the Great Barrier Reef as a marketing banner, from which to dangle individual North Queensland resorts; to entice and encourage prospective holiday consumers, both from within Australia and overseas.

All in all things seemed to develop pretty well, between 1959 and 1969 sales grew and the Barrier Reef shared in this visitation growth. However, as we approached the end of the 60's there were some aspects of the Barrier Reef region that began to trouble us.

The majority of visitation was occurring in only a few weeks of the year. This was creating an increasingly skewed seasonal pattern of business which had a considerable impact on the profitable performance and standards achieved by resorts in the region.

Some resorts failed, others needed to 'trim their sails' to keep afloat. This put pressure on management and staff and on general standards of operation, for instance some resorts found it necessary to close down for some of the low season months.

This meant a discontinuity of staff causing a constant problem of training new staff to maintain standards of operation and ensure continuity of service levels. In general there was a tendency to hire unskilled, itinerant service staff which reflected directly on the standards of service provided by resorts.

At the competitive level Australians were travelling overseas more and were able to make direct comparisons between standards overseas and standards in North Queensland.

From an airline point of view, similar problems were experienced - some months heavy demand, high load factors, other months low demand, low load factors. More importantly, if resorts were not up to standard or failed to meet consumer's expectations, if they had bought a TAA promoted holiday travel product they directed their complaint at TAA and held TAA responsible. Hence we were exposed to the full range of consumer reactions to products in the North Queensland region.

I became aware of the magnitude and nature of this problem from involvement in the region earlier in my career with TAA.

During the latter half of 1968, I had the pleasure of spending six months in Mackay as Acting Manager for TAA. During that time I came to know the Whitsunday resorts and the people running them very well. I also represented TAA on the Great Barrier Reef Promotional Council, a very energetic local association, dedicated to promoting the region.

Later in 1970, soon after my appointment to a position which gave me responsibility for TAA's national holiday travel operation, I became more directly involved in marketing the Great Barrier Reef resorts for TAA.

One of the major promotional activities organised by the Great Barrier Reef Promotional Council was the annual Great Barrier Reef Festival staged by the resorts which were members of the council.

The festival was usually held in late September-early October. Mainly because this was a traditional "off-season" period.

At both South Molle in September 1968 and at Brampton, September 1970, I recall that weather conditions during the week of the festival were perfect, the resorts were chock-a-block with FOC's or freebees, as we call them in the trade. Of course these were people who were invited because they had something in a promotional sense to offer the region.

Without doubt on each occasion everyone had a fantastic time and the resorts in the area were at their sparkling best. If you have ever sat on the front beach at either South Molle or Brampton on a balmy September day watching the sunlight dance on the waters of the Whitsunday passage you will know exactly what I mean.

However, on both these memorable occasions the question crossed my mind, if the weather and the resorts were such that those present were having a great time, why weren't there more paying customers at the resorts during September and October, and for that matter why didn't they come in the other so called off-season periods?

In retrospect I realise that this was my first insight into the fact that maybe the seasonal pattern of business experienced by these resorts in the vicinity of the Reef was not caused by natural phenomena such as cyclones or wet seasons or by the timing of the school holiday periods, but in fact by an ineffective marketing strategy based on unquestioned assumptions.

The marketing strategy at the time may be summed up this way.

"The Great Barrier Reef is one of the great natural wonders of the world. It is well known by everyone. Anyone wanting a great holiday could not resist wanting to come to a resort near to the Reef. Therefore the obvious way to develop the holiday market to the region is to associate the resorts with the Reef".

In simpler terms it was assumed, that in the mind of the consumer, the equation was: Great Barrier Reef = Great Holiday.

Between 1970 and 1974 TAA not only questioned the validity of this strategy for the Queensland islands but also began to experiment with alternative strategies.

I have to admit that raising the proposition that the Barrier Reef may not be a suitable basis for a marketing strategy for resorts in the region met with considerable resistance both from within my own company and from operators in the areas concerned. Presumably because it symbolised the need for a radical shift in attitudes towards marketing the region.

One of the very first experiments with an alternative strategy took place in the Mackay region in Spring 1972 when in conjunction with the main resorts of Brampton, Lindeman, Happy Bay, South Molle and Daydream, TAA launched a national promotional under the theme 'five islands for the price of one'.

In contrast to the Reef strategy this was a price oriented strategy. The promotion was not only extremely successful but also had considerable impact in demonstrating that alternative marketing strategies could bring people to the area. It greatly helped in opening the way to acceptance of strategies other than one based on the Great Barrier Reef.

TAA's shift in thinking is clearly expressed in the brochures we produced to sell the island resorts between 1972 and 1976.

In late 1975 TAA commissioned a major consumer research study on the attitudes, needs, perception and knowledge of Australians towards holiday making in Australia.

The objective of the study was to provide an information base on which TAA could revise its general strategy towards the development of the Australian holiday travel market.

We sought answers to questions such as:

What do Australians really want in a holiday?

Do people of different age groups and different life cycles and lifestyles want the same or different things in a holiday?

What do Australians think about Australian destinations and Australian holiday resort facilities?

What do Australians really know about Australian holiday destinations and resorts?

I will summarise the main findings concerning the reef and the island resorts.

Surprisingly, there was an extremely low level of consumer awareness of specific island resorts amongst Australian consumers, that is, hardly anyone in the main Australian markets knew of the existence of the resorts concerned let alone anything about what they had to offer.

You may think I'm exaggerating, but I couldn't help but notice an article in the 'Melbourne Herald', a letter to the editor. The title of this letter was 'Those Airfares'. Knowing that I was coming to this workshop what it said struck me and I think it's worth reading. This person said:

"I am appalled at this continued saga of the so-called cheap airfares to overseas countries. Naturally we would all like to visit other countries as cheaply and as economically as possible, but surely many Australians who take this lucrative bait and accept one of the package deals made by the respective companies do not have any idea of what their own country has. On a recent holiday to Queensland, I was surprised at the many coastal tourist resorts that our eastern coastline has to offer".

I repeat, this person was surprised, so in spite of all our marketing over the last 20 years, here was at least one consumer that did not know our products were available.

"How many of those who accept these overseas fares have ever taken a really good look at our own beautiful country. Surely our many tourist agencies and various airlines could promote tourism in Australia first before throwing in everything to push the Australian tourist overseas." (P. Valentine, Nuns Road, Mornington).

This letter reinforces this point about awareness of our products in the Australian market. Whether they had been to the islands or not, most Australians had a very poor opinion of them, a selection of verbatim comments from our research groups mentioned earlier sums up consumer attitudes. The islands were seen as expensive.

In general, whether people were single and young, older and better off, or members of families, they found little or knew little about the resorts with which they could identify as being important to them in satisfying their holiday needs.

On the other hand the image of the Reef itself was good. TAA's researchers summed it up this way,

"overall, the image and reputation of the Reef itself is very high. But in discussion it becomes apparent the image seems to stem from a certain chauvinism rather than from any real conviction. Enthusiasm is passive and would not generate action. For example, all the older respondents thought the Reef fantastic but only a couple expressed any interest in going there".

However, among many who visited a 'Great Barrier Reef' island resort, the Reef's image waned when they were confronted with the practical difficulties of getting to see or learn something about the Reef. This point has been reiterated many times this morning. Unless they had had the good fortune to choose Green Island or Heron Island they found that the Reef could be up to 40 arduous miles by boat, if the tide was right! If it wasn't they had to be satisfied with a glimpse of "fringing" reef near their resort from a glass bottom boat.

No doubt during their stay they heard wonderful tales of the "Swains" and were frustrated by other exotic features of the Reef.

This research enabled TAA to not only break up the consumer market into distinct groups with common needs, that is to segment the market, but to identify those things that each separate group thought important to them in a holiday.

We are prepared to discuss this research with anyone who is interested in evaluating the effectiveness of their own particular marketing strategy. In particular, P&O took an interest in the study results and were able to use them to advantage in marketing support for the resorts in which they had an interest, that is, Heron, Lindeman and, together with P&O we did some research on Dunk.

All in all, the research confirmed our earlier feeling that, in the minds of Australian holiday consumers, the Great Barrier Reef meant little to them in terms of holidaying. With the information we obtained about market segments we were able

to adopt an effective marketing strategy to market those resorts which we had previously marketed under the banner of the Great Barrier Reef.

This revised strategy was expressed and reflected in TAA's marketing. It has been demonstrated through our holiday travel brochures since 1977. Our current brochure finally realises what the product is in terms of the islands and in terms of the needs of the Australian market. We then set about devising separate tactical strategies to get people to some or all of the islands.

The Great Barrier Reef can be effectively used as a basis of a marketing strategy for North Queensland in overseas markets. However I think the essential point is that it's no good selling that, if you're not going to be able to provide facilities when they get here, which seems to be one of the key points to come out of this morning's discussion groups.

What then, are the implications, of what I have said so far for both the Queensland Department of Tourism and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority? I might also add that I think these implications are equally directed to every individual or organisation involved in the development of tourism to this part of Australia.

For the Queensland Department of Tourism I consider there is yet an untapped market of Australians who will come to North Queensland for a holiday, in fact the Australian market will continue to be more important to North Queensland than the overseas market.

To tap this market North Queensland will need more resort facilities. These facilities will need to be designed, developed, and operated with the Australian market in mind. The Department should do all that it can to encourage investment in new resorts and, as it has done, ensure that existing resorts are operated at the highest professional levels.

The Australian market needs to know about available facilities so effective marketing strategies are required. However such marketing strategies must be formed in terms of what Australians want in a holiday. The validity of any assumptions made in formulating new marketing strategies must be tested.

Only one fifth of the turnover for Australian travel agents comes from selling Australian travel and tourist services. The Department must assume a responsibility on behalf of Queensland's tourist industry to encourage all Australian travel agents to sell more Queensland travel.

Finally the Department must recognise the true role of the Reef in terms of tourism and through both the private and public sector, work towards the accomplishment of that role.

In turning to examine the implications for the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority I will first comment on the issue raised in the last point: what is the true role of the Reef in tourism? I've expressed the view that it is acting as an albatross around our neck rather than the goose that laid the golden egg.

The Great Barrier Reef ranks as one of the most spectacular natural wonders of the world. It symbolises the mystery and wonder of the world in which we live. It is indeed a world treasure.

Australia and Queensland have a responsibility to the world as caretakers of the Great Barrier Reef. On the one hand it must be protected and preserved, primarily from man. On the other hand there is a responsibility to make it possible for as many people who wish, to have access to the Reef.

The Great Barrier Reef, along with the other natural wonders of the world, transcends man-made barriers. Experience of it can provide unifying insights amongst people, it can teach us more about the evolution of life on this planet and it does provide a unique background for the satisfaction of simple human pleasures.

The true role of the Reef in tourism then is that it provides a natural focus for mankind's aspirations, whether they be spiritual, intellectual, aesthetic, or physical.

However, at a more pragmatic level, I believe that Australia and Queensland can derive significant economic benefits through providing the services and facilities which permit people, whether they be Australian, or any other nationality, to satisfy the whole range of human aspirations.

TAA's research suggested that Australians have an insight into this true role for the Reef, reflected in their "chauvinistic pride" of the Reef. On the other hand, as recent

marketing experience shows, Australians are much more interested in the Reef as a background to satisfying simple human pleasures. But I do believe that if easier access and imaginative interpretive facilities and services are available, Australians will use them.

What then are the implications for the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority?

The development of the travel and tourist industry to North Queensland, so far as the Australian market is concerned, is and will continue to be almost entirely independent of the fact that the Reef is nearby.

On the other hand, the development of the international tourist market for North Queensland regions near to the Reef will depend upon better access to the Reef's wilderness areas and the availability of a network of imaginative interpretive centres. I will go as far as to assert that such facilities will be a prerequisite for the development of the international tourist market to this region.

Consequently the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority by its charter, can and must be the catalyst to bring about the establishment of a network of imaginative interpretive centres near to the main tourist regions in the proximity of the Reef.

Australian tourists, who are now being attracted in increasing numbers to the regions near the Reef, could provide the basis for the economic viability of such interpretive centres, if they have to be economically self-sustaining.

In conclusion, I restate the three main points of my presentation:

There is no need to be concerned about selling the Reef. It is already well enough known.

Marketing strategies to develop the tourist industry in the regions near the Reef are needed, but to be successful they must reflect the needs of people who can be attracted to these regions.

In terms of the true role of the Reef in tourism there is a need for the development of a network of imaginative interpretive centres along the North Queensland coast, and as well for much better access to wilderness areas of the Reef. In fact these two things will be essential if Queensland and Australia want to develop the international tourist market to the region for both its economic and cultural benefits.