NOTES ON MY TRIP THROUGH NEBRASKA, OR SOME ALTERNATIVE MARKETING PRINCIPLES FOR PARKS AND RECREATION

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I started working on this talk on December 19th last year. That was the day I began my trip home from Colorado at the end of my fall semester sabbatical. While traveling through Nebraska I started seeing things that I just couldn't believe. Not just a single thing, but one thing after another. This had to be an omen. I knew immediately that I had found the topic for my Founder's Forum presentation.

I was going to call this the highlights of my trip through Nebraska, but that title was already taken (it was included on the list of shortest books ever written). Let's just call it, Notes on My Trip Through Nebraska, or Some Alternative Marketing Principles For Parks And Recreation.

I saw Nebraska's scenic overlook – yes they have one, on I-80 near the western border of the state. Didn't stop there, neither did anyone else. I think it's because you already have a pretty good view of the whole field from the highway. In fact after hours of uninterrupted views of the field that is Nebraska, you don't need a scenic overlook.

This observation was validated after my return when I went on the internet to look up Nebraska. Sure enough, there was a web-camera offering uninterrupted live views of, you guessed it, a field in Nebraska.

So, what are some of the tourist attractions in Nebraska? They include:

- *Buffalo Bill ranch*
- *Cabela's factory outlet (this one really did draw a crowd)*
- *Pony Express statue*
- *Omaha, home of Omaha steaks, where you can get four 5 ounce steaks for $50.00, or is it five 4-ounce steaks. What difference does it make; they're too small anyway and certainly fairly low on the value scale.*

But the number #1 attraction in Nebraska is . . . *Pioneer Village*

How do I know? From the many signs advertising this fact. We'll come back to this later.

Do you know there is an actual sign on I-80 in Nebraska that says: (I'm not making this up)

> *Monument Ahead*
> *Do Not Stop or Slow Down*

This was followed by numerous signs warning you of the amount of fine for stopping or slowing down ($100), and an enormous London Bridge-type structure across the highway. Just a bridge, no roads hooking up to it but just a bridge in the middle of nowhere, that you couldn't slow down to look at.

This led me to wonder, what are these people trying to do here. I tried to think of Nebraska's tourism slogan and eventually found it on the internet. Does anyone know it? You'll kick yourself when I tell you. Actually I found three slogans:

- *America's Heartland*
- *Cornhusker State*
- *The Tree Planters' State*

Obviously none of these are any good.
Here are some possible alternatives they could consider:

- *Bring your own music* (although they do have *both* kinds of music there)
- *You can make good time in Nebraska* (In Nebraska, they don't have a lower speed limit for construction zones. All they want you to do is slow down to 75)
- *Sagebrush highway* (symbolizing the fun of running a slalom course down the interstate, avoiding the sagebrush whistling across the highway)
- *You can't get to Colorado without driving through Nebraska first* (this would only work for those coming from the northeast)

Or they could take a lesson from some of our own northeastern states. You know the familiar ones:

- *Someone loves New York*
- *Virginia has its lovers*

We're so embarrassed about the Pennsylvania slogan that you can't even find it on the PA website. But you can find some other interesting stuff there.

Like a list of rejected slogans for Arizona's tourism theme:

- *Arizona – Bring your camera and your Grandma*
- *Arizona – A Yucca minute*
- *Arizona – Where you can have a dirt lawn and its OK*
- *Get your AZ over here*
- *Arizona – the zippy zone*
- *Hug a zonie*
- *Arizona has the hots for you*

Closer to home, the Pocono Mountains recently unveiled its new slogan: "Pocono Mountains – more to love." You see, they were trying to shed the image some people hold of the Poconos as a tacky honeymoon capital. The heart-shaped logo in the new slogan represents the river and highway running through the Delaware Water Gap, rather than a bathtub. They better put a footnote on that slogan to explain that to potential visitors.

Northumberland (Ontario) solved its identity crisis through the slogan, "Real Ontario, Real Country, Real Close." They had nearly 1,800 catchy phrases submitted, and chose "We're close, We're country, We're waiting." A professional marketing consultant massaged those words into the final version, keeping two of the original six words. Should have gone with the rejected one, "did someone say party?"

Enough of that. Let me return to the planning phase of my trip to set the stage. I was on sabbatical last fall and getting ready to return from Fort Collins, CO to my home in Pennsylvania. The first decision was, should I go through Kansas or Nebraska. Tough decision. Kansas, Nebraska, Kansas, Nebraska. How do you decide. As it turns out, it doesn't make much difference. I looked at weather forecasts and travel distances and chose Nebraska. Besides, even though I was warned about Nebraska, I had already come out by way of Kansas and knew it didn't have much to offer.

Let's back up even farther and discuss the rocket box. Do you all know what a rocket box is? It's one of those yuppy, aerodynamic cartop carriers. (Not the Sears cartop carrier, which is just a box). I bought the rocket box before my family came out for a visit over Thanksgiving. I figured this was the best way to transport the five of us (with luggage and skis) in a Mazda 626 for about ten days (it beat out the next best option of renting another car by a wide margin). One of the reasons for choosing the rocket box was a marketing ploy – they would install it on my car for free. I knew the Sears box would require tools, which I didn't have. I also remembered hearing somewhere that you needed to put a small person (like a child or preferably a midget, because they are stronger) *inside* the box to install it on your car. Wishing to avoid this problem, I selected the rocket box.

Now here comes a marketing principle in action. I asked the sales person how much the rocket box would affect my gas mileage. He said not to worry about it, not much at all, maybe 1 mpg, 2 mpg at worst. Sounded good to me, but I was skeptical. From then on I started watching my mileage closely. The initial results were startling. I was losing about 10 mpg on my Mazda 626. I didn't panic, figuring that there were other factors involved. I was now transporting a full load of 5 people plus gear up and down the Rocky Mountains. Certainly this load was not equivalent to my normal highway driving conditions. I continued to keep track after the family returned home, all the way through my return to Pennsylvania. The rocket box continued to subtract a good 6-7 miles per gallon regardless of driving conditions.

This led me to my first basic marketing principle:

NEVER TELL THE CUSTOMER THE TRUTH.

I was forewarned of this principle several years ago by the Dilbert comic, which stated, "that just appears to be customer fraud. It's actually marketing."

You don't have to lie outright. Maybe just stretch the truth, exaggerate, or leave something out. Consider some other well known marketing campaigns demonstrating this principle:

"Save a buck or two" (1-800-Collect) – compared to what, putting up your own telephone lines. I guess it sounds better than "One of the more expensive ways you can make a long distance call"

"At last value in State College" (Motel 6) – this is on a sign outside Harrisburg on the way to State College. It makes you wonder, where is the value in a place that replaced a nice mom and pop motel that had some character, with a shoebox with a roof that charges at least $10 more per night. I say at least $10 because they always prominently display the room rate on their sign, and it is different almost everyday. The slogan should have read, "we'll get as much out of you as we can."

I had the opportunity to collect some tourism-related examples from Pigeon Forge, TN a week ago. (I was on a class trip, not just traveling around for fun). So many examples to choose from:

- *Anita Bryant Music Mansion Theatre: The largest theatre in the Smokies*
- *Dixie Stampede: The most fun place to eat in the Smokies, I guarantee it (Dolly Parton)*
- *Elwood Smooch's Hillbilly Hoedown: The happiest show in the Smokies*

The Pigeon Forge Travel Planner lists a lot of details for all of these places, such as

- 32 magnificent horses, beautiful belles, and beak to beak ostrich races (Dixie Stampede)

What is the underlying theme of these marketing strategies? I believe it is the use of numbers, and especially superlatives like #1, world's largest, newest, highest, happiest, whatever it is.

So what is principle #2:

QUANTIFY, QUANTIFY, QUANTIFY.

Now let's return to Nebraska's Pioneer Village for examples of these marketing principles in action.

Claim	Principle in Action	What's wrong with this
5 million satisfied visitors (on a billboard)	Principle 1: an obvious lie, completely unbelievable	Yellowstone doesn't have 5 million visitors, when did they start counting, and how do they know they were satisfied,
12 miles south of I-80 (on a billboard)	Principle 1: Way too honest/ Principle 2: Unfortunate use of numbers	Nobody wants to travel 12 extra miles out of their way (each direction) in Nebraska. Alternative: how about "just off the interstate"
50,000 Historic Items (on a billboard)	Principle 2: Inappropriate use of numbers	I have 50,000 historic items just in my garage; this has no drawing power. It is like Dr. Evil getting his numbers confused ("why make trillions when we can make billions")
Real name of place: Harold Warp's Pioneer Village (from the Internet)	Principle 1: Too much information	Harold may be a local hero, but we never heard of him. Better to leave this out, which they do except on their website.
28 buildings on 20 acres, 90 room Pioneer Motel, 100 antique tractors (from the Internet)	Principle 2: Overkill on numbers	This stuff is probably accurate. But who's counting. There was a whole lot more of this quantification on the website.

This marketing campaign did not increase my interest in visiting Pioneer Village.

Here are some other ludicrous examples of marketing to think about.

There are now ads on television for the new gold one dollar coin. Does anyone have one? Have you even seen one? Why market something where demand is so high that supply can't hope to keep up? How about marketing the Susan B. Anthony silver dollar. Or just don't worry about it. Who cares what kind of money people use?

Along the same line, there was a newspaper story and some ads about a company that has developed vending machines to count your coins, in exchange for a 9% commission. They offered a coupon for a free dollar coin as an incentive for trying their machines. Now, is there any need whatsoever for this service? What is so difficult about counting your change? Just spend it, or take it to a bank and they'll count it for free.

I saw a news story last week about a power company investing in research to reduce the flatulence among cows. (again, I'm not making this up). It seems the power company may get off the hook for its pollution emissions if it can mitigate the damage some other way, as in reducing cow farts, which appear to be a sizable problem in some areas.

Closer to our own field of study, power companies are now paying for research to determine if the lakes created by their dams are actually a factor in peoples' decision to visit the lake. You see, if someone just happens to visit the lake for some other reason besides the lake being there, then the power company doesn't have to pay for that person's share of the upkeep of the lake's facilities.

This reminds me of an early personal research memory. I was a master's student at Texas A&M and we went out to start a new project at Lake Amistad on the Mexico border. I was anxious to pilot test some new questions we had written attempting to measure anglers' attitudes towards catching fish. "Consumptive propensity," we called it. This was early in the evolution of human dimensions, but the multiple satisfaction approach to fish and game management was gaining momentum, and it seemed useful to measure how important the harvest was to the overall fishing experience. Useful to us I guess, but not to the old boy who happened to be my first respondent, who greeted me with the statement, "what kind of damn fool questions are these, anyway."

Well I recovered from that challenge, and along with several others in the room, have continued to explore the concept of consumptive propensity, which does offer the resource manager a tool for segmenting user groups and managing for a quality recreational experience. So let's return to the power company research on why people visit the lake. While it seems like a straightforward matter (put a lake there and people will come to it), people are now haggling over how to ask the question so the benefits can be partitioned into those that were induced by the power project and those that were not. And the power company is lobbying its hardest for the question format that will yield the lowest percentage of "project-induced benefits." This may set a new standard for misuse of the benefits-based management concept.

Let's look at one final area of dubious research – economic impact analysis. I don't mean to offend anyone here (god knows I've done some of this research myself), but what is the point of it. Once they asked us to study the economic impact of football at Penn State University. Why bother? I didn't even know they were thinking about dropping football. Penn State's football program does not need to justify its existence (basketball, on the other hand, might be another matter). People spend a lot on it, everyone knew that before the study, and they still knew it afterward. But now they could put a number on it. So what? You know the irony of it; shortly after we showed that home football games pump some $40 million into the local economy, a one dollar "impact fee" was added to the price of tickets to compensate the local governments for the extra services required on football Saturdays.

Last week I was astounded with a misuse of economic impact data. I listened to the acting superintendent of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park describe a current hot issue. The Cherokee tribe in Cherokee, NC had asked the park for several hundred acres in order to build new schools. It seems there is no other suitable land in the city and property values are so high because of the new casino. Besides, the casino generates $2.5 billion in economic impact, which is greater than the sum total generated by Gatlinburg, Pigeon Forge, and Sevierville combined. Sounds compelling, right? When asked where the 2.5 billion dollars went, he said that 93% of it went back to the customers who put the money in the slot machines in the first place. Now that's not economic impact, it's just money changing hands, back and forth.

Let's do a hand-on exercise to demonstrate this point. Everyone take the largest bill in your billfold and hand it to the person sitting on your right. Then continue to pass those bills all around your table until you have your original bill back. (This exercise assumes honesty at the tables, the speaker is not responsible for any lost money). If we assume 100 people exchanged on average $10, and did this ten times, we just created $10,000 worth of economic activity. Do you think we could use this information to negotiate with the Omni hotel for a better rate? No. Why not. Because they are smarter than that. We too need to know the difference between bogus numbers and real ones.

Economic impact analysis is often applied to justify tourism development and marketing. Let me share with you the text found on a favorite t-shirt. I picked up this shirt in Sedona Arizona last fall, because it impressed me more than any other shirt I saw (which was quite a few in that tourism Mecca). It read:

Go into the desert alone
Sit on a cactus
Pick up the bugs
Go without telling anyone
Pick up the snakes
Go without water
We thank you for you visit
Now go home

Sedona Arizona

That captures the gist of it. No one wants tourists in their backyard. Nor in their town or the neighboring forest or park. They just want the money. Now there is the challenge for researchers and managers. Figure out how to get people to send their money without actually visiting or using the resource.

We have a good example with sportsmen. Hunting and angling groups are concerned that their numbers are declining, and are even calling for research aimed at increasing participation. Well, when is the last time you heard about an under exploited fish or game species. How could there be a problem of too few hunters and anglers? The problem is that fewer sportsmen means less license revenue, which impacts bureaucratic budgets. We need to find alternative funding strategies that remove agency programs from such problems. Perhaps the current funding initiatives relative to watchable wildlife and nonconsumptive recreation activities will lessen this problem in the future.

Let's think about bottled water as a final example. Consider two scenes observed in my home community. The first is a series of vending machines outside a large discount department store. These machines sell various beverages, including Coca-cola products, Pepsi products, and bottled water. Isn't it interesting that the companies that spend millions on advertising can sell their sodas for 35 or 40 cents a can, while the adjacent machine charges a dollar for the raw material that the soda companies start with before making their products. We all know there is no point in marketing Coke and Pepsi. People either like one more than the other (and would never buy the other one), or they don't care and buy whichever one is on sale. In either case they are not likely to be influenced by the companies' marketing campaigns.

On the other hand, you see very little marketing of bottled water, and it commands a high price that is unquestioned by consumers. This is demonstrated by the second scene, which features a bottled water machine standing right next to a water fountain in a public high school. I wished I could be there at night to get a picture of them filling the bottles from the fountain and putting them in the machine.

Here they are charging a dollar for something that you can get for free very easily. How can they do this? It's not just that school kids these days have more money than they know what to do with. I've seen the same thing at the stadium and other places as well. I think people like to buy bottled water because they know it is good for them. It doesn't need marketing because it sells itself.

We can learn from this in marketing our parks and natural areas. In many cases, people are attracted to them because they know they are good. And they are willing to pay for them just the way they are. In essence parks are like bottled water. They can sell themselves. Let's learn to take advantage of their natural qualities and not worry about too many "improvements."

And let's not put up a sign saying, "Park ahead – do not stop or slow down." The National Park Service recently embarked on its "Message Project," which sought to find out what the American people think about their national parks. One of the things they learned was that, in many places, visitors are getting the message that the parks are being "loved to death," and they (the visitors) are the cause of the problem. This message must change. It is important to address the visitor impacts that underlie this image, by restoring damaged areas and reducing visitor conflicts. At the same time, park information services should try to instill in visitors the idea that the parks are very much alive and worth protecting.

Thank you and enjoy the rest of the conference.

For Further Information:

http://www.visitnebraska.org/

http://www2.pioneervillage.com/pv/