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Tourism B.C. goes one-on-one with visitors to the province using Xerox technology

The Canadian Marketing Association gives it the gold for customer service excellence

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by Kathleen Sibley

The Canadian Marketing Association recently honoured Tourism B.C. with top awards for its work with Xerox Canada's 1:1 lab on the tourism organization's BC Escapes 2005 direct marketing campaign. Pipeline spoke to Joel Tkach, marketing manager at the Vancouver-based organization, about what the project involved and the benefits it derived.

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Pipeline: Give me a little bit of background on how and why you got involved with the 1:1 lab.

Joel Tkach: The 1:1 opportunity was brought to our attention through our agency, Blitz Direct. We are very much into direct marketing and direct response marketing, so instead of just mailing people information we engage them in a dialogue and say, 'this is the type of information we have, are you interested in any of it?' That enables us to learn a little bit and fulfill whatever their information needs are.

Pipeline: How did you become one of the 10 selected organizations?

JT: Xerox was very careful in selecting the first 10 organizations to use the lab because they wanted disciplined direct marketers to use their technology so they could build case studies to talk about how successful marketers integrated their technology.

Pipeline: How does the 1:1 marketing work for you?

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JT: We took a standard 44-page brochure we called a B.C. Escape Guide, which primarily was geared to consumers with a level of familiarity with B.C. It was like a reader's digest version or more abbreviated version of our more standard planning publications, so it had less detail about the destinations and very specific accommodation offers. That was specifically targeted to people who had awareness and who would use these guides to plan a three- to four-day getaway. With the Xerox 1:1 technology we took a standard 44-page guide that had a little bit of information about Vancouver, Victoria and Whistler and had a wide range of prices for hotels, and we turned it into something that was about half the size based on us getting a little more information from our consumers so we could specifically design a piece that meets their unique information needs.

Pipeline: How do you know what to send to whom?

JT: Traditionally we had three variables, so when we got an information request we would ask the consumer their point of origin, their intended length of stay, and then a simple two-pronged question: were they interested in general site-seeing or outdoor activities? Based on those questions we could then tailor the information package to them based on publications we had on the shelf. What we did with the Xerox 1:1 lab is we introduced four new variables on top of those three. Those new variables were the nature of the travel party (age groups); other questions referred to what season they were planning to visit in and the preferred accommodation price range. We expanded that to include what types of activities they were interested in, so we had urban, arts/culture, golf, hikes and walks outdoors, or spas and retreats. So now we have seven variables and this starts to create a very complex matrix because we could deliver information on any combination of those variables. So instead of sending any generic publication that just spoke a little bit about lots of things, this ended up being very specific and telling them exactly what they wanted. In addition to content, we also have the supporting information that let the Xerox technology really customize this piece, so we could do something as simple as print the consumer's name on the front cover. And instead of a generic cover image, it would be of a specific destination they said they were most interested in. Then on the inside we would have a map, and we would highlight the state or province of origin of the consumer and connect that with a dotted line to show where B.C. is in relation to where they were. There was even supporting imagery.

Pipeline: Tell me a bit about the challenges this project posed.

JT: Definitely there were challenges on the project management side, because as soon as you add a new variable you have multiplied the number of options considerably, and we also wanted to ensure we were delivering adequate content to the data elements we were capturing. So, for example, to learn someone was interested in golf but not be able to deliver at least an adequate level of information we think a consumer would expect is something we're very conscious of. Instead of having one guide with a little information about lots of subjects, we actually had to go in depth about several more subjects, and then be able to mix and match them and insert them in certain sections of the guide based on the information we received from that consumer.

Pipeline: What were the benefits of participating in this?

JT: The major benefit was learning more information about the consumers, and being able to act on it. A lot of direct marketers end up getting a lot of information, but their challenge is being able to act on it. We created a benefit to the consumer, so in exchange for them giving us more personal information, within two weeks, we were able to deliver a very specific and customized piece.

Pipeline: What happens next?

JT: One of the things that is happening in the tourism industry is we are striving to get consumers in contact with the right product, and we want to do that through the channel they

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choose. Most often the consumer is choosing to do that online, so where we're going in the future is being able to deliver this type of customized information online or in print format depending on the consumer's choice.

Pipeline: Would you end up having to buy more Xerox equipment?

JT: We would end up using existing Xerox equipment. All the printing took place in Ontario in their lab so we set up a system where we would capture the data, and once a week we would send it to Terminal van Gogh (one of Xerox's partners in the 1:1 lab) and a few days later they would output the publication and drop it in the mail. At this point it's cost-prohibitive to purchase that equipment on our own. It would have to remain an outsourced thing and if Xerox set up an operation here in Vancouver, we would do it locally.

Pipeline: What lessons did you learn from this project about successful personalized marketing in general?

JT: If you're going to capture unique and personalized information from a consumer, use it in a way where the consumer sees the benefit, and that opens the door to more trust with your consumer and increased dialogue with increased frequency, and it's less likely a consumer will choose to disengage the dialogue with you. Our permission for future contact rates is extremely good.

Pipeline: I understand there were some cost savings - can you elaborate on that a bit?

JT: We took a standard off-the-shelf publication that was 44 pages and when we were done the Xerox customized guide ended up being 24 pages, so we saved on printing, and because the guides weighed less, our mailing costs were saved as well. That number is being calculated now. We want to be very specific on that number so we're working with Xerox on that.

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