

Off-season Marketing Strategies for Travel Agencies in Shiyan City

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Abstract. An important task of travel agency marketing is to break the “off-season ice”. Based on the definition of off-season travel in Shiyan city, the paper analyzes the current situation and off-season marketing problems of travel agencies, and then puts forward the marketing strategies for off-season travel in order to promote traveling and the prosperity and development of tourism industry in Shiyan.

Introduction

It is known that the tourism industry is distinctively seasonal. Busy season and off season alternate due to such factors as important events, climate, holidays, geography, etc. As a leading enterprise in tourism, travel agencies are inevitably affected by the different tourism seasons.

As a microcosm of the national travel industry, travel agencies in Shiyan also have to deal with the sharp contrast of different seasons. During the off-season period, most of the travel agencies in Shiyan City have poorer operating performance, less market share, and less income compared to the busy season. Many travel agencies find it difficult to make both ends meet, affecting the overall development of travel agency industry in Shiyan city.

However, better marketing strategies may solve the problem. Zhang Ruimin, president of Haier Group once said: there is no off-season market, only the off-season thinking. Negative response will not help. Rather, tourism enterprises have to learn to change and adjust marketing strategies during off-season periods. There are advantages in Shiyan city that can be fully taken of, such as rich tourism resources, population and potential tourism market. If the travel agency managers operate properly and wisely with rational marketing strategies, it can completely reverse the market decline and realized prosperity even during off seasons.

Definition of Off-Season Specific To Shiyan Travel Agencies

The so-called "off-season", as a concept, is relative to the busy season or peak season, during which period the number of target consumer's decrease due to seasonal changes. In the whole course of tourism, the time when there is an obvious increase in the number of tourists visiting a certain place (or the number of people who travel out) is referred to as the busy season or peak season, the time when there is an obvious decrease of people is called an off season, and the time when there is no obvious change in the number of people, a flat season ^[1]. In terms of time, the off-season period generally is the time from November to the coming March, or roughly the winter and spring period.

Specifically in Shiyan city, the busy season lasts from June to August. It is the most competitive time for travel agencies who launch their own tourism products and tourism lines, to attract workers from Dongfeng Motor Corporation, since they can enjoy a fairly long holiday due to the hot temperature. However, during the spring and winter time, due to less demand for tourism, the travel agencies in Shiyan city face a slump in business. This period is off season.

The Off-season Marketing Situation and Problems in Shiyao Travel Agencies

Shiyao City, a low starting point for the development of tourism, starting late, the travel agency industry to small and medium-sized travel agents mainly during the off-season operating status is not optimistic: lack of demand for tourism and over saturation of tourism products. Statistics show that compared with the peak season, the total amount of Shiyao City, travel agencies during the off-season decreased by about 60%, more than half of the loss of travel agents; off-season during the travel market share decreased significantly, Shiyao city travel agency in the off-season marketing mainly in the following problems:

Tourism in Shiyao started late and low. The travel agency industry features small and medium-sized travel agencies, and the current situation is not optimistic during the off season: lack of demand for tourism and over saturation of tourism products. Statistics show that compared with the peak season, there is a decrease of 60% in the amount of tourist reception, and more than half of the travel agencies are operating at a loss. The travel market share drops significantly during the off season. The off-season marketing problems in Shiyao travel agencies mainly include:

Homogeneity and Lack of Market Innovation

Most of the travel agencies have a strong dependence on the tourism market, without much innovation. In addition, there is serious homogeneity among off-season tourism products, which are not well-initialized. The current tourism products in Shiyao city mainly are: (1) conventional tourist routes, which include cross-province routes, local routes and routes abroad. Cross-province routes include Hainan route, Jiuzhaigou route, Zhangjiajie route, Yunnan route. Local routes include Danjiang route, Wudang Mountain route and Shennongjia route, the latter two being the core products. Routes abroad involve countries like Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand and some European countries. (2) Feature tourism routes. These routes are targeted towards certain groups of people or special events. For example, there are routes specially targeted for those who love to travel by driving their own cars, such as the self-driving route in Shatoupo, Ningxia province. The routes specially made for certain events include Shennong Winter Snow Festival, Fangxian hot spring tour, etc. Of all these products, only feature routes, by definition, avoid homogenization. The rest are basically the same regardless of busy season or off season. There is no route tailored for off season that distinguished itself from the rest.

Outdated Marketing and Weak Publicity

The development of Internet and mobile communication has greatly affected the way tourists collect information. Unfortunately, travel agencies in Shiyao city have not taken full advantage of network technology in tourism marketing. As a result, the process of standardization, intelligentization and informatization in the development of travel agencies is retarded.^[2] Presently, the majority of travel agencies in Shiyao city are still handing out leaflets, newspapers and magazines, and putting up outdoor advertisements to promote off-season tourism products, scarcely making use of online advertising, microblogging, WeChat and other modern marketing. The problem with the traditional marketing is obvious, unattractive contents, slow updates and non-interactive interface, losing hold of the potential customers who access information solely through mobile phones, the so called "Mobile terminal addicts".

Monotonous Marketing and Prevalent Low-Price Promotion

There are about 100 travel agencies, most of which are small and traditional, resulting in a lack of adequate market competitiveness. There is no accurate market positioning for most of the travel agencies, so the price war is the main means of marketing competition. During off season in particular, in order to win over customers, the travel agencies have to squeeze down the price. The excessive low-price in turn brings a lot of hidden dangers, such as disrupting the market order, reducing the quality of tourism products, damaging the image and reputation of the travel agency. These impacts might even affect business performance during busy season.

Wrong Marketing Philosophy and Low Morale

In 1985, Barbara Bend Jackson introduced the concept of relationship marketing. The purpose is to establish and develop good relationships between the business and the relevant public. But in reality, many travel agencies mistaken this concept for simply interpersonal relationships, and center their marketing on banquets and bribes, rather than actively establish a modern marketing awareness and management, and develop an effective marketing strategy from a strategic height.^[4]

The consequence of the misunderstanding and the wrong marketing philosophy is highlighted by the recent carrying out of the "eight provisions", "six bans" from the central government, which prohibits spending public expense for personal pleasure. The new policy, together with the advent of the off-season tourism, results in an even sharper decline of market demand. The management of many tourism enterprises subjectively believe that marketing will not help, and the staff members gradually lose their morale, which in turn worsens the already bad situation^[3], creating a vicious circle.

Off-season marketing strategy for travel agencies in Shiyan city

Innovation Awareness and Characteristic Tourism Products

The tourism market is changing rapidly. Relying on the traditional tour lines cannot be welcome in the tourism market any more, especially during the off season. The travel agencies in Shiyan city have to carry out a series of strategic adjustment of tourism products: such as local improvement and/or in-depth transformation for the original tourism products to enhance the experience, and addition of new characteristic products. Take Wudang Mountain route for example, it is sensible to develop a program in which tourists can experience Taoism rituals, or open up a new program featuring Taichi health maintenance. Short-distance routes can be developed for people when the weather is not so pleasant. Characteristic products may include special winter route in Wudang Mountain for people to enjoy the beautiful scenery of Wudang covered with snow, and programs that are specially designed for the elderly people to provide young people with a channel through which they can express their love and respect for their parents.^[2]

In short, Shiyan city travel agency managers should be aware of product innovation and business awareness of the importance of innovation, whether it is product content or product introduction, do not seek exhaustive, but must be different in the tourist season, so as to suit themselves Operating characteristics, to adapt to the ever-changing tourism market^[3].

Innovative Marketing Methods and the Implementation of Promotional Mix

As is stated before, the mobile internet technology has fundamentally changed the way tourists collect information. In this context, travel agencies need to make full use of information technology to innovate marketing, to push product information to a larger target market, so as to achieve better publicity, especially during off season.

In addition to innovative marketing methods, it is also important of implement promotional mix, or the combination of promotions. Together with traditional promotions, travel agencies in Shiyan city can be actively engaged in social welfare activities, and strive to assume more social responsibility and establish a good corporate image, to win consumer praise and improve the visibility of travel agencies. At the same time, it is feasible to make full use of some major events to promote tourism during off season^[5], for example, the Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to Shaolin Temple greatly increases the number of tourists who come to that scenic spot in off season.

Cooperation for Better Competitiveness

The small and medium-sized travel agencies in Shiyan city are scattered and isolated, therefore it is difficult for them to resist risks in the off season. It is advisable for them to cooperate with some trustworthy partners to set up a collaborative body to jointly plan travel routes, so as to regulate the chaos of the off-season market prices, and jointly maintain profit margins. It is especially important for the off-season tourism market^[2].

Another type of cooperation is that the travel agency can set up joint ventures through shares, and carry out chain operation, drawing lessons from the development model of China Travel Service Shiyao Bao Tourism Association, in which the various travel agencies can share complementary advantages and resources. By joining such platforms as the Tourism Association, travel agencies can offer competitive integrated market tourism products to gain competitive advantage and reduce business risk, eventually achieve economies of scale, avoiding the traditional low-price means of competition which does more harm in the long run.

Improving the Quality of Staff Members

All the strategies and planning from the management are ultimately carried out by terminal staff members, so it is of equal importance to transform their concepts of marketing and improve their personal skills in marketing through training. Due to the nature of the work in travel agency, most employees rarely have the opportunity to be trained together. The off season period is the best time to gather employees for training, since it is a time they are the least busy all year round. Even if all the strategies to promote off-season tourism are carried out in the off season, staff members cannot be busier than when it is busy season. The travel agencies can seize the off-season leisure to "recharge" staff members: to learn the trend of domestic and foreign tourism development, to attain more modern marketing theory and skills, so as to improve their business skills. When their concepts of marketing are changed, changes in their action will naturally follow. In due time, they may help promote tourism performance in off season.

Conclusion

Most of the travel agencies in Shiyao city are small and medium-sized, which are vulnerable especially during off season. Their tourism products suffer from Homogeneity and lack of market innovation, and the management still sticks to the traditional channels for publicity. To promote tourism marketing in off season, it is suggested that the travel agencies cooperate with each other to set up joint ventures, innovate ways of marketing via mobile internet technology and help staff members improve both their concepts and business skills.

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