

February 9, 2008
Burlington Free Press

Oh, Canada, Vermont is open for business

By Joel Banner Baird
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Washington calls on Americans to spend their way out of a recession. Vermont business leaders are calling on Canadians to pitch in.

This time, the pitch goes beyond ski slopes, hiking trails and mulled apple cider.

Beginning today, more than 1 million color glossy newspaper inserts, in French and English, will extol to Montrealers the virtues of the Green Mountain State's retail-rich landscape.

The \$100,000 advertising campaign comes just two weeks after the U.S. put in place widely publicized, contested -- and subsequently diluted and postponed -- border-crossing procedures.

Business advocates in Vermont and other border states lobbied against the Jan. 31 deadline for travelers to produce more detailed citizenship documents, citing that its ambiguity would curtail commerce.

Tasha Wallis, the executive director of the Essex Junction-based Vermont Retail Association, said the timing of the new promotion and its unique emphasis on "le shopping" might restore consumer confidence.

But the vision of long lines at Customs booths did not shape the strategy.

"We've always known that retail was a part of the travel mix," Wallis said Thursday. "Now we're saying it can be the focus of a trip. We're saying, 'Vermont is open for business: Come and stay and shop.'"

Strength in numbers

The new marketing blitz took shape in September -- when it became apparent to Vermonters that the summer's strong Canadian dollar would hold firm.

To capitalize on the exchange rate, Wallis met with marketing specialists from the Lake Champlain Regional Chamber of Commerce, the Vermont Department of Tourism and Marketing, Basin Harbor Club in Ferrisburgh, Topnotch Resort and Spa in Stowe, Smugglers' Notch Resort and Manchester Designer Outlets.

A collaborative effort, they reasoned, could carry a bigger message to the northern neighbors.

Today's flurry of promotions will be accompanied by a "giant e-mail blast" to Canadian consumers, said Steve Cook, the department's deputy commissioner.

"Part of our goal is to capture more consumer information, like e-mail addresses," Cook said. "We want to drive people to our Web sites."

Online and off, the Canadian-only promotion will encourage recipients to register for one of three "shop-and-stay" vacation packages, replete with gift certificates.

Cook said the collective investment, beyond its size and its focus on retail, was unique in its inclusion of Francophones: Readers of La Presse and La Tribune will receive a French version of the insert.

It's a significant departure from previous ad campaigns. After all, Montreal's anglophones -- about 600,000 at the last Statistics Canada estimate, equal to Vermont's total population -- could be perceived as the more likely candidates for a trip to the U.S.

Yet a sales pitch to greater Montreal's remaining 3 million residents allowed the marketing team to fine-tune Vermont's image as a sophisticated yet rustic departure from metropolitan life, Cook said.

Five of the seven papers receiving the fliers are in English. And the department's Web site and promotional literature, and those of the other participants, remain emphatically Anglocentric.

That could change, Cook said: Eight months ago, his department opened its first bilingual tourist call center in Newport, with two French-fluent operators standing by.

The regional chamber of commerce also plans to step up efforts to accommodate Quebecers. A few weeks ago, it posted on its Web site driving directions to Burlington from Montreal, in French.

A fully translated frequently-asked-questions section is "in the works," said Tim Shea, the chamber's vice president.

Like Wallis, Shea has stated repeatedly that he's concerned that Canadians might skip impulsive shopping excursions to Vermont if they're unsure of their official welcome.

The big, bilingual shopping promotion couldn't be better timed, he said -- for several reasons.

"After the holiday season, it quiets down here a little bit," he said. "This ought to give everyone a shot in the arm."

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