

# TripAdvisor sponsorships pit North v. South Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – TripAdvisor isn't solely driven by free content like customers might think it is. Chambers of commerce and visitors bureaus may buy regions, thus in turn dictating what content viewers see.

The divide is pitting the North Shore against the South Shore in Lake Tahoe.



In July, the North Lake Tahoe Visitors Bureau locked in the use of Lake Tahoe, Calif., as a region. This means people clicking on that region will be fed information dominated by the North Shore entity.

Todd Skelton, sales manager with TripAdvisor, spoke to the South Lake Tahoe Lodging Association meeting Jan. 13. He talked briefly that morning about this new product his company has, but more in-depth with *Lake Tahoe News* the following day.

"We do that because user generated content is great for hotels, restaurants and attractions, but it may not be the best content for a region," Skelton said of the sponsorships.

It's also clearly a tool for TripAdvisor to rake in some cash. The one-year sponsorships range in price from \$7,500 to \$70,000. The entity that has the rights has first right of refusal when the contract expires.

Skelton said the price depends on how detailed the sponsor wants to be as well as unique visitors to that page.

According to Carol Chaplin, Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority

executive director on the South Shore, TripAdvisor first offered Lake Tahoe, Calif., to the North Shore. Andy Chapman with NLTRA did not return a phone call.

Skelton said he doesn't have the history of how NLTRA got those rights, but said it is possible for the two agencies to share the name.

"North and South could not play nice in the sandbox. They could not figure out how to split the content," Skelton said.

Starting next week, LTVA will have sponsorship title of Lake Tahoe, Nev.; South Lake Tahoe; and Tahoe area.

"It's an unbudgeted expense, but was required for us to maintain our 'territory,' if you will," Chaplin emailed LTN.

What exactly the respective Lake Tahoe tourism bureaus are paying to TripAdvisor is not known at this time.

TripAdvisor allows nonprofits to buy the regions, not a business. The city of South Lake Tahoe would qualify as such an entity if it so desired.

It wasn't until last year that South Lake Tahoe was listed as its own region. Skelton at the meeting said it has skyrocketed to the 10th most searched California destination – below Santa Barbara and above Napa.

He said even though Expedia bought the 10-year-old company about three years ago, the parent company does not influence placement. For example, a hotel that does not use Expedia will not be placed below ones that do on TripAdvisor, according to Skelton.

One thing that surprised the packed room at the LTVA office on Thursday is people writing reviews from their rooms in Tahoe are likely to not see their posts go live. This is because TripAdvisor's fraud detection system assumes the use of a local IP address is someone in-house doing the review, not a

guest in the hotel.

A concern brought up by a meeting attendee was what to do about the customer who complains about something, then threatens to write a negative review on TripAdvisor if their room or meal is not comped.

Skelton advises not giving into to threat. He added that businesses may make a “management response” on the site to counter any negative reviews. However, all the examples he used in doing so were to agree with the person – as in, yes, we are making changes to fix such and such.

Some members in the audience said their experience with TripAdvisor in trying to refute what they called a bogus complaint was unpleasant. It became a he said, he said situation, with the negative review staying.

TripAdvisor and other reviewing sites like Yelp are affecting how consumers choose where to sleep, eat and play. Skelton said TripAdvisor has 35 million reviews, with more than 42 million unique visitors a month.