

Mountain travel experts hash out ways to lure consumers

By Kathryn Reed

OLYMPIC VALLEY – With skier visits down this season, lodging occupancy at 40 percent and consumers having more choices where to spend their travel-leisure dollars, what are mountain communities supposed to do to stay competitive and solvent?

Embracing that skiing is more than a sport – it’s a lifestyle – is one suggestion. Tap into the fact that people say “I am a skier” and not just “I ski” is what Ian Arthur, chief marketing officer with Intrawest, told a group of industry officials Wednesday morning.

Arthur, with Kirsten Lynch, chief marketing officer of Vail Resorts, and J. William Seccombe, chief marketing officer of Visit Florida, bantered back and forth as they delved into the business of destination mountain travel.



Ralf Garrison, director of MTRiP, speaks April 18 at the Mountain Travel Symposium. Photo/Kathryn

Reed

The three were part of one of the sessions during the 37th annual Mountain Travel Symposium that is being hosted by the Resort at Squaw Creek. With several hundred in attendance for a multi-day conference, this is billed as the largest gathering of mountain travel professionals in North America.

Ralf Garrison, director of MTRiP (Mountain Travel Research Program), said, "Pure destination guests, led by international visitors held up the best while the local and regional skiers and boarders were more fickle and made fewer trips to the slopes. As a result, destinations catering to multi-night visitors who book well in advance fared better than the resorts that are more dependent on regional and short-stay guests and the disparity among the various resorts is more pronounced this year."

Dan McHale, general manager of Inn by the Lake in South Lake Tahoe, echoed that sentiment. He told *Lake Tahoe News* that it was the international travelers, primarily Europeans, who were filling his rooms this winter, while the Bay Area skiers stayed away.

The MTRiP data Garrison released April 18 shows below normal snowfall and warm weather had skiers doing other things this winter. While the previous handful of years showed skier visits above the 60 million mark, when the final tally comes in at the end of April it's likely that number won't hit 50 million for 2011-12, he said.

Perception is everything. The drive-up market for resorts on both sides of the country stayed away as the snow was sporadic, this, despite the abundance of snowmaking in so many places.

Weather is always a factor. A year ago, the snowfall set records in Tahoe for the abundance, this year is was all about

the scarcity of white stuff.

If NOAA's Climate Prediction Center is correct with this week's posting of warmer water in the Pacific likely to generate an El Nino weather pattern for fall 2012, it could translate into a wetter winter for California next year. However, with where Lake Tahoe is located, these El Nino and La Nina predictions for the rest of the state don't always hold true for the Sierra.

It was the destination traveler who saved this season.

As Garrison pointed out early in his presentation, for places that consider themselves destination resorts, the season could be salvaged, but for those claiming to be just a ski area, the season was one to write off.

Occupancy during the ski season at Western mountain areas was down 3.9 percent during March compared to the same month last year, Garrison said. Throughout the winter months the occupancy is down 2.3 percent.

The bright spot for hoteliers and those receiving hotel tax, though not for the consumer, is the average daily rate was up in March by 1.7 percent compared to 2011, and is up 4.8 percent for the November-April ski season compared to last season.

To move forward, Garrison said, "You are going to need to generate your own demand." This is because while consumer confidence is up slightly, it is basically flat.

Arthur pointed out how 25 years ago there was 40 percent more ski resorts in the country and that with the supply going down this should be good for the areas still remaining.

One way to get people into the sport is to show more people having fun. It was pointed out how *Ski* magazine shows shots of serious skiers. Photographs aren't of people laughing, having

a good time, socializing, or conveying emotion.

Lynch said with Gen Y being full of risk takers and wanting freedom it's a tough balance between traditional skiing and turning a resort into a sports theme park.

Seccombe pointed out how with all the television channels there are that poker and fishing have more outlets than skiing. With the X Games and Olympics being the only times skiing, boarding or other snowsports are on TV, this gives the mountains little exposure to potentially new customers.

"With billions of dollars spent to lure the same people, mountain travel needs to broaden its approach or it will see a drop off," Seccombe said.

Some of the constraints the industry has are price, how long it takes to learn the sport, and accessibility to the mountains.

"We need to start telling our story to a broader consumer base," Arthur said.

Lynch said the whole summer experience needs to be part of the discussion when it comes to traveling to the mountains.

"There are a lot of choices out there and we need to stay relevant," Lynch said.

Thinking beyond the traditional skier was brought up. Not everyone in a family or group skis. Promote the spa, shopping and other activities.

McHale said he noticed with his guests that many come to the South Shore not to ski, but to be in the mountains. He partners with Heavenly Mountain Resort so they can go tubing.

Give people more than just a day on the slopes. Seccombe singled out NASCAR and how cameras are put in vehicles so spectators can keep watching those left turns made by their

favorite driver.

Arthur said the best way to deliver more to the consumer is to know more about them.

Lynch summed it by saying the way to be successful is to concentrate on delivering service and experiences to the guests – making it all about them – and touting the destination less.