

Dissecting demographics key to knowing Tahoe visitors

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Paying attention to what the population looks like is critical to knowing who to market Tahoe to.

That was the overriding message of Emilyn Sheffield. She was one of two presenters at the annual Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority-Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce tourism conference on Thursday.

Sheffield, who is a professor at CSU Chico, also brought 20 of her students to the South Shore. They spent several days in the area essentially testing the tourist product.



Professor Emilyn Sheffield suggests ways South Shore tourism officials can draw more people to the area. Photo/Kathryn Reed

The other speaker was Ralf Garrison, director of MTRiP – Mountain Travel Research Program. Much of the information was the same that he delivered at the Mountain Travel Symposium at the Resort at Squaw Creek earlier this month.

The two-hour event April 26 at Harveys drew a crowd of about 100 people.

Using information from the Census to project trends in demographics, Sheffield said it's important tourism leaders in Lake Tahoe realize that California's population by 2020 is expected to be 41 percent Latino, 37 percent Anglo and 12.5 percent Asian.

She said while Tahoe has relied on Anglos in the past, this cannot continue unless the region wants to be an exclusive enclave.

Sheffield added that while the Tahoe South website redesign looks good, it needs more.

"You only see Anglos. You need more diversity of photos and more diversity of spokespeople," Sheffield said. Too many white people on the website was her complaint. People who travel want to see people who like them doing what they might do in whatever location it is.

Sheffield added that growth in the Asian market could be good because historically they are interested in gaming. But she said Hispanics overall don't like the snow, so it's good the area has four seasons.

Sheffield suggested three things for the South Shore to focus on:

- Recapture the Baby Boomers by reconnecting with them through their values of peace, love and harmony with nature. She added that if hotels are not pet-friendly, they would lose this group.
- Rethink what accommodations are like. Boomers and Hispanics are traveling not as couples, but multigenerational. This means two rooms, two bathrooms in a single unit. Sheffield said they tend to rent houses instead of condos. With the

Latinos, they like to go places where people know how to speak Spanish.

- While the millennials have meager means today, they are the future. “Expect them to be loyal,” Sheffield said. That’s why they should be lured to Tahoe today. She said they may only have \$200 to spend in a weekend, but they will spend it all. Hostel-like accommodations may be the answer for lodging, then the rest will be spent on food and entertainment. And for this generation, make sure there are enough plugs for all of their digital devices.

Garrison pointed out how tourism businesses need to look beyond the traditional people they market to. He said a resort in the Tahoe area during January had an 80 percent spike in ski school business – when there was no snow.

The resort was attracting beginner skiers who felt safe to drive the mountain roads.

“So it shows there are different ways to market,” Garrison said.