

Tourism experts: Experience trumps product

By Kathryn Reed

A pretty lake and casinos. That combo is no longer enough. That is why Lake Tahoe needs to up its game if it's going to keep attracting tourists.

That was an overriding message delivered this week by those in the industry.

Lynn Carpenter, vice president of marketing for Visit California – the state tourism agency, said her people are focused on showing the California experience. It's sharing the California lifestyle, a place where visitors can have an emotional connection to wherever they are visiting.

California has lost a segment of the tourism market in the last few years. It used to be that 52 percent of travelers came to the state; it's now 45 percent.

One thing helping the overall state effort is that the marketing budget has grown from \$6 million in 2006 to \$150 million today. Promotional material includes television ads, online pieces, written propaganda, and offices in foreign countries. There is information on the state website that can also be used by local tourism agencies as well as individual businesses.



Marketing material from Visit California. Photo/LTN

Carpenter along with Carl Ribaud of South Lake Tahoe based SMG Consulting spoke April 26 at the annual tourism conference put on by Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority and Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce.

“It’s not just the thing you have in your destination. It’s about how interesting you are and the connections that people make,” Ribaud said.

The whole point is that the product is different than the experience. Old school is to have focused on the product. Memories have always been what people take away from a vacation. Tapping into that in a deeper way is what the experts say needs to happen.

“We talk about lifestyle. They want to live like a Californian,” Carpenter explained.

The marketing zeroes in on the outdoors, culinary, entertainment, culture and luxury.

This was the first winter for Catch the Winter Wave – outdoor fun in California in winter. Crews will be in Mammoth next week filming snowboarding sensation Chloe Kim at her home

resort. That footage will be used for next year's campaign.

"We love talking about the snow product when we're overseas," Carpenter said. This is because so many foreigners equate the state with just beaches and Disneyland.

Family travel is also big, capturing 42 percent of the market. That is one reason the state has come up with a second video targeting kids. It will be called Welcome to Kidifornia. Carpenter wouldn't divulge any specifics.

Tourism is big business in the Golden State, accounting for \$121 billion in revenues in 2015 and more than 1 million jobs.

Visit California divides the state into 12 regions, with Tahoe being in the High Sierra. In 2014, \$2.6 billion in direct spending is attributed to tourism in this region, there were 28,000 jobs, and local tax dollars totaled \$98 million.

Statewide, Canada, China, United Kingdom, Australia and Japan account for the most international visitors. For the South Shore, it's Germany, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia and China. The High Sierra is the only region where Germans are the No. 1 visitor. This is attributed to their love of the outdoors.

Ribaudo is a believer that arts and culture need to be a larger component of what the South Shore offers because those are things people connect to. He wonders why all the art created at the three-day SnowGlobe music festival isn't out in the community.

He also doesn't believe the area tells its history in a compelling manner, if at all.

"We need to make every part of the South Shore interesting," he said. "It's the little things that matter." This includes right down to the bike racks. For what is supposed to be bike friendly town it's hard to know cyclists are welcome if they

have no place to park.

He showed pictures of other locales that are doing things better – like Oceanside with its abundance of bike racks, public art in obscure towns, and funky restaurants that are destinations unto themselves.

“What will keep people coming here is if we are real and authentic,” Ribaudó said.