SKIFT GLOBAL FORUM 2015: TAKING RISKS TO MARKET AN ICON LIKE NEW YORK CITY

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Fred Dixon, the CEO of NYC and Company, will speak at the Skift Global Forum on October 14 and 15 in Brooklyn, New York on marketing trends for iconic brands and destinations such as New York City. See the complete list of speakers and topics for this year's event.

How do you market a destination that has been on travelers' bucket lists forever and what kinds of new approaches are needed?

Dixon, who has been at the helm of NYC and Company since March 2014 and has wide experience in the travel and tourism industry, thinks it is vital for tourism marketers to under their audiences regardless of ever-evolving marketing platforms.

In that regard, Dixon believes that some marketers and organizations are too risk-adverse, and that's a formula for stagnation.

Skift asked Dixon about trends in marketing household-name destinations.

Skift: Thinking about iconic tourism brands — and not just New York City — how does their marketing have to change in coming years? How can such iconic brands deal with the pace of change in terms of the next social platform or smartphone du jour?

Fred Dixon: New York City is constantly evolving and innovating, and our most successful strategies reflect that vigorous energy so change is built into our DNA. Keeping pace with the changing landscape is a tremendous challenge nonetheless and in particular for iconic tourism brands to not only maintain relevancy but keep up with an ever-evolving supply of media channels and technologies while still building deeper authentic engagement.

Before you can leverage a new platform, however, we still must know our key audience to be effective. Know what they want, what motivates them, and how they utilize new technology and channels. The goal still being to speak to them in an authentic and genuine voice to inspire not only first-time visits, but influence length of stay, deeper exploration, sharing and return visits long into the future.

One of the most powerful trends today is the need for "experiential travel" – the need to connect for a deeper "live like a local" experience and new platforms and technologies are fertile ground for development. By presenting the familiar as exotic and experiential, we can change the conversation and influence new audiences. Our See Your City campaign and its use of new platforms, local influencers and vibrant creative is one example.

Skift: Lots of young travelers, who might turn into repeat visitors to NYC, see Airbnb and the sharing economy as their only option for seeing the big city. How can you better appeal to these young travelers or don't you need to because they aren't big spenders and aren't staying in hotels?

Dixon: Young travelers are and will always be an important part of our market mix. Experiencing New York City is a rite of passage for young people from around the world and creates generation after generation of lifetime return visitors.

The shared lodging space aside, NYC has experienced an unprecedented hotel building boom over the past few years which has created more opportunities than ever for travelers, including young ones, to experience New York City on their own terms with lodging choices at a wide range of price point and product type so choice is not an issue.

That boom has added more than 30,000 new hotel rooms so far throughout the five boroughs making neighborhoods citywide more accessible and inviting than ever before. We also promote regulated shared accommodations, such as YMCA Guest Rooms, along with a variety of affordable select-service hotels.

Skift: Excluding NYC & Company, who are the innovators in tourism marketing these days and what are they doing that you think is amazing?

Dixon: I think some of the most interesting work is happening at the destination level. Travelers need to be inspired, and it's the destinations who are telling authentic stories that activate and engage visitors' curiosity, emotions and interests.

I consider Tourism Australia to be among the best in connecting with their audiences in a very fresh, contemporary way while remaining true to their brand essence. They have combined high-quality content with smart, strategic use of a variety of digital platforms and content to create a compelling story.

Skift: What are the one or two things that you see tourism boards doing wrong in their marketing?

How can they tweak things to right the ship?

Dixon: We often talk about the “intrepid traveler.” I think we need to make the “intrepid marketer” part of the conversation as well. Like many other industries, a reluctance to take risks can hold us back from making new connections with new audiences. Embracing new ways of telling a destination’s story can be a scary business, but I see rigid risk-aversion as a danger as well.

Einstein said, “If you always do what you always did, you will always get what you always got.” If growth is a goal we must be willing to experiment.

Skift: How has the NYC neighborhoods initiative been doing? Are visitors really getting out to the Bronx in real numbers? I see that the NYC City Council was considering limits to the number of Uber/ride-share options in the city. Would that hurt the neighborhoods’ initiative or does ride-sharing not come into play because of mobile roaming charges?

Dixon: The neighborhood initiative is doing very well. In fact our latest research showed that the number of Bronx visitors increased by 14% in a single year. Growth in visitation to the boroughs beyond Manhattan in fact has been growing at a faster pace than Manhattan itself.

There are a number of contributing factors in addition to our increased promotion, including robust hotel development across the boroughs plus new tour and cultural product… all coupled with an increase in demand for “live like a local” experiences. There are no better places to explore for rich local culture than the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island.

In addition, New York City’s public transportation system – its subways, buses, ferries and bike-sharing – makes it one of the most interconnected cities in the world, and that’s a huge advantage when traveling the five boroughs. The vast majority of New Yorkers and visitors use public transportation when moving about and ride-shares along with taxis are additional options, so again in NYC options are never limited.

Skift: We have a couple of renowned rivers framing Manhattan. Is there — or do you think there should be — a push to further develop them for tourism? What do you see as NYC & Company’s role in such efforts?

Dixon: Luckily, the development of New York City’s waterfront and use of its waterways is already well underway and their role in visitors’ experience has long been established with cruises to the Statue of Liberty, dinner cruises and sightseeing cruises popular on itineraries for many, many years. We have long endorsed visitors’ use of the “blue highway” to explore the five boroughs and with continued expansion of ferry service in New York City’s future, our city’s rivers will only continue to play a growing role in the visitor experience.

Not only do the rivers offer a scenic way to travel between boroughs and a new perspective of the cityscape, but they are home to some of the “greenest” New York City experiences. Visitors can enjoy canoeing and kayaking on many of the rivers, and architecturally magnificent parks, scenic bike routes and beaches alongside them.

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