

Column for Business Mirror
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The Entrepreneur

Philippine tourism: Fixing the paradox

CONCLUSION

IT'S been a year and a half since the "Pilipinas Kay Ganda" fiasco so I sort of heaved a sigh when the Department of Tourism announced on January 6 the new tourism slogan: "It's more fun in the Philippines."

However, my feeling of relief that the long search for a slogan was finally over turned out to be short-lived. The prime-time newscast in the evening of the same day carried a news report implying that the new slogan might not be original. It was very similar to the long-existing slogan of Switzerland—"It's more fun in Switzerland!"

I don't intend to join the debate over the best slogan that would boost Philippine tourism. Since the withdrawal of the first slogan under the new administration, and given the amount of time spent in search for the appropriate "battle cry," I had been harboring a personal concern that when a new and acceptable slogan is adopted and the brand building is completed, the administration may be at the end of its term.

Then a new president is elected, a new slogan is adopted. Is this impossible? Not really. The Department of Tourism conducted two biddings, the second in September 2011, or nearly one year after the withdrawal of "Pilipinas Kay Ganda."

The DOT announced in December 2011 that BBDO Guerrero/Proximity Philippines was selected and appointed as "agency of record" for the department. The agency will be tasked with "creating an idea that will shape all forms of communication for the country's domestic and international tourism promotions."

The DOT continued: "Further development of BBDO Guerrero's concept is under way and the first iterations of the new campaign will emerge in the course of the first half of 2012."

The statement sounded nice and lofty, but the last phrase about "iterations [defined as an instance or act of doing something again] emerging in the first half of 2012" had me worried again.

Then we are looking at the middle of the administration's six-year term before we can really push tourism. By that time, I believe the grounds of Bangkok will be dry and its streets will again be teeming with visitors.

What's the point of all this? I mentioned earlier the lack of focus and wrong priorities (the latter also applies to the endless search for a slogan). I believe that while we talk about how to improve tourism, including a new branding, we may be forgetting the quick fixes that we can undertake to attract more visitors.

These quick fixes are not expensive. These may even be cheaper than the cost of hiring an agency to come up with a new slogan. For example, I think we should review how we issue visas because we may continue to be strict with citizens of some countries, which have become progressive, and whose citizens are now able to afford travels abroad.

I have heard complaints from countries like India and China whose people say they want to see the Philippines but find it difficult to obtain tourist visas.

In short, our visa is not tourist friendly. Our visa policy should be relaxed. We should look at countries that do not even impose visa requirements.

If we can accept visitors from Asean members with no visa requirements, why can't we welcome citizens of other progressive countries?

To take care of security concerns, our law-enforcement agencies can establish (if they have not done so) or develop close relationships with their counterparts in other countries.

Another quick-fix issue: why are other countries able to bring down the travel costs of their visitors?

Just scan the newspaper pages and watch the television commercials, or the posters on the walls of travel agencies. It's so cheap to go to Singapore or to Hong Kong, so a lot of Filipinos take advantage of the budget promos or package deals to fly to these places for shopping, short vacation or holiday trips.

Sometimes it's even cheaper to go to Hong Kong than to Davao, unless the traveler takes advantage of the promotional fares offered by local carriers and is able to make quick travel plans to coincide with the promo period.

Why can't our travel agencies, our airlines and our hotels come up with tour packages to entice tourists to visit the Philippines?

In addition to being inexpensive, these and other quick fixes can be adopted and implemented immediately—no legislation required, just some executive or administrative orders, and some coordination with industry stakeholders.

For the longer term, the government may encourage the real-estate industry to channel its ongoing boom into the construction of hotels and other tourist accommodation and service facilities.

There is a lot of money in real estate. It could be channeled for the construction of more hotels and other tourist facilities but they have to be given the necessary incentives.

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