

The Power Of The Caribbean Diaspora - By Bevan Springer

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Last week's article on the importance of courting the intellectual and financial capital of the Caribbean Diaspora has provoked some important responses and proposals from members of the Caribbean community and the Diaspora about the wisdom of engaging an upwardly mobile and influential market that to this day remains 'unrecognized' and 'underexploited'.

Former BWIA airline executive, Trinidadian Ian Bertrand, now with El Perial Management Services, shared a concept paper on Diaspora-centered tourism which his company prepared for an Association of Caribbean States meeting in Colombia six years ago. In it, he outlined that the Diaspora market was more readily inclined to visit the region and that focusing on it was a marketing tool capable of developing its own markets as well as reinforcing campaigns geared to the region's traditional markets.

"Hotels have generally done little to woo the Diaspora visitor," he noted in the 2002 paper. He continued: "Their price breaks go to the mass-market tour operators. A Caribbean Tourism Organization study seems to indicate that Caribbean hotels earn higher rates from Caribbean visitors than overseas visitors! However there is an increasing trend that the Diaspora visitor now wishes to stay at hotels rather than in the family home, especially if they 'bring a friend along.' The hotels therefore need to recognize this trend and to aggressively target the Diaspora market either in conjunction with the regionally owned carriers or through the travel agents that serve that market. Improved pricing should be part of the new campaign."

He argued that recognition on the part of the tourism authorities - translated into respect for our own people - was needed. Six years later, little has changed.

Former Cabinet Minister Athie Martin from Dominica proposed that "if each member of a Diaspora organization (or) community were to send one friend or colleague who did not plan to visit the Caribbean each year, the numbers of stayovers to the Caribbean would double ... and foreign exchange earnings would expand significantly." He argues that direct jobs and occupancy levels would increase and the spin-offs into the construction, transport, entertainment, insurance, banking sectors and the general economy would register major improvements.

In spite of the overwhelming evidence, sound proposals and the biblical principle that "as iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another," (Proverbs 27:17), many of our tourism marketers tend to place our eggs in traditional baskets, choosing the Madison Avenue mindset and the accompanying inflated operational costs. This has not proven to be more effective, just more expensive. Caribbean people are increasingly overlooked when marketing plans and programs are being developed. They are sometimes engaged in the short run and then disengaged through time, and when their brains are picked, while their ideas may be embraced, their professional services are discounted, if not completely disregarded.

Caribbean professionals are eager to be engaged and want to make a contribution to the socio-economic development of their region - if given the tools they would deliver "exceedingly abundantly above all that our marketers could ask or think." That is the nature of the Caribbean man and woman, but their kindness should not be mistaken for weakness since "hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life." (Proverbs 13:12).

Ian Bertrand argues "a major driver to visit are the emotional ties to home, the need to 'regularly return to roots' to enjoy, but for a short-while, past lifestyles but on higher incomes, (and) the wish to demonstrate that emigration was the correct decision. Then there are business reasons, key family events, whether joyful or painful, significant cultural events (the various carnivals), showing the children 'whence they came.' Once home they are likely to visit places that they ignored while residing in the community thus directly spreading tourism generated income across the country."

If sufficiently mobilized and armed with updated information, Bertrand posits, the external Diaspora in its day-to-day social interactions can describe in detail the attractions of their home communities or countries to friends, fellow workers, employers and fellow college students. "The members of the Diaspora possess the power of 'word of mouth communication' and through social intercourse have the time for detailed marketing in an informal atmosphere without the perception of an aggressive 'sell'. They can pass on the secrets of a truly great vacation in the community, giving contacts who will welcome visitors as long-standing friends, naming places 'off the beaten track' - like a little known beach with great surfing or a small hotel or guest house that treats you 'like family' or maybe a little known restaurant that serves excellent local cuisine, but at local prices. In summary, they possess the ability to bring community-centered tourism to the marketplace and wield it as a powerful marketing tool."

With renewed focus placed on this issue today, Caribbean marketers have an incredible opportunity to change their practices, especially given some of the shock factors - from passports to the US economy - that could restrict tourism's growth in 2008 and beyond.

A recent report in the British press in which Barbados' new Minister of Tourism, Richard Sealy, sounded plans to recruit ex-pats living in the UK to act as ambassadors for the nation is right on track. "We feel very strongly that Barbadians living in the UK can get involved," Sealy said. "They should not be on the outside looking in. (They) are interacting in the workplace or in social places and can be ambassadors for our tourism."

Such vision is refreshing. Let's hope that we don't have to wait another six years for our leaders in both the public and private sectors to be inspired to not just talk, but to act.

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