

*Special Section*CONTEMPORARY MARKETING STRATEGIES AS
COMMUNICATION TOOLS FOR MODERN RETAILERS**Winter, You Win:
Ithaca Convention and Visitors Bureau “Surrenders”
to Key West with an Unconventional
Campaign that Goes Viral****Arlene A. Flowers****Yvette Sterbenk***Ithaca College*

Abstract

With record-breaking cold and snow affecting the Northeast corridor, the Ithaca/Tompkins County Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) faced an even more dauntingly slow winter season than usual in its central New York community with diverse retailers, restaurants, and attractions. Using shock value and humor, the CVB created a reverse psychology marketing campaign by “surrendering” to the weather and, through messages on its website and a sponsored Facebook post, recommended visitors travel to sunny Key West instead of Ithaca. The campaign resulted in more than 1,000 stories in media outlets, the highest traffic ever to its VisitIthaca.com site, and the number one trending topic on Facebook and Twitter. The CVB used the media spotlight to convey positive messages about its local businesses and capitalized on digital traffic to remarket to newly acquired contacts using a warm weather promotion. This case study provides an overview of the rationale and campaign components and looks at viral marketing and electronic word-of-mouth.

Keywords: VisitIthaca.com; social media; reverse psychology marketing; viral marketing; eWOM

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Introduction

In the winter of 2015, the entire Northeast corridor faced severe cold and snowy weather, with many cities achieving record-breaking snowfall and cold temperatures. The Ithaca/Tompkins County Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) in central New York grappled with how to generate traffic to its retail, culinary, cultural, and recreational attractions during its traditionally slow off-season. Typically from December through early February, hotel occupancy rates hover around 40%, whereas rates average between 80% to 90% during the vibrant warmer months from May through October (Mitchell, 2016). The CVB sought a new approach beyond the continuation of its “Ithaca Loves Teachers Winter Recess,” which targeted elementary and high school educators during their winter break in February. The educator promotion traditionally increased 200 to 300 room nights while costing more than \$20,000 to produce and requiring significant time to implement (Mitchell, 2016).

The CVB developed a reverse psychology marketing campaign, a strategy that has been used creatively by fast food chains and retailers. For instance, the pizza franchise Little Caesars created a “Do Not Call” multimedia campaign that warned customers to avoid calling 1-800-Try-Little-C and logging onto ForbiddenPizzaWebsite.com. An article in *Adweek* stated that it “boldly tests the limits of quirkiness and customer curiosity” (Gianatasio, 2012), while reiterating messages about hot and ready pizzas available all day at affordable prices. Patagonia, the retailer of active wear, created a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* on Black Friday in 2011, with the headline, “Don’t Buy This Jacket,” which conveyed sustainability and ironic anti-consumerism messages (Della Costa, 2015). Patagonia donates 1% of its sales to support grassroots environmental groups.

CVB’s Mission, Competitors, and Assets

The primary mission of the Ithaca CVB is to attract tourists to stay overnight at the county’s diverse accommodations and to promote local shops, restaurants, cultural attractions, and indoor/outdoor recreation. According to the CVB, food and drink comprised the largest tourism dollar expenditures at 35%, followed by lodging (28%), shopping (25%), and local transportation (7%) in 2010 (VisitIthaca.com, n.d.). The CVB is a

division of the Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce, and its website and three visitor centers serve as important consumer resources, particularly by promoting independent retailers and local travel businesses with limited promotional budgets.

The region mainly attracts visitors within four- to six-hour driving distances, with the major markets being New York City, Buffalo, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Ottawa, and Toronto (Mitchell, 2016). During the winter months, the primary competitors are not other Northeastern snow destinations (except for skiers), but Florida and southern locales with sunny climates and beaches. 2015 was a particularly strong year for Florida tourism, which broke records by being the first state to welcome more than 100 million non-residents as tourists, with a record 54.1 million visiting between January and June (Dineen, 2016).

Located in central New York at the southern tip of Cayuga Lake within the Finger Lakes Region, Ithaca is renowned as a college town with an intellectual vibe, rich cultural attractions, and unique retail experiences. The region's slogan "Ithaca is Gorges" stands for the area's 100-plus gorges and waterfalls. The region is part of the Cayuga Lake Wine Trail, considered America's first wine trail, which is dotted with U-pick farms and farmers markets. Ithaca claims to offer more restaurants per capita than New York City, with farm-to-table menus and international cuisine. A four-block pedestrian area, the Ithaca Commons, also draws visitors and locals alike, with more than 100 independent stores, restaurants, and outdoor vendors, along with year-round events.

"Surrender" Campaign and Subsequent Remarketing

After reviewing the media flurry of negative articles on the weather in the Northeast and experiencing in the region a record number of days at zero or below temperatures, the CVB staff realized that promoting the traditionally slow winter season would be more daunting than usual, and their usual customers would most likely head south. However, they still wanted to continue to build awareness of Ithaca as a tourism destination through traditional media outlets and social media, and they wanted to draw traffic to the CVB's website without spending a lot of money. The CVB staff decided to "surrender" to winter with unexpected wit by giving in to its winter destination rival, Key West, which the Ithaca CVB director

described as a “kindred spirit,” because of its similar liberal and artsy vibe. The Ithaca CVB director called the Monroe County Tourist Development Council to receive permission to use an image from the Florida Keys’ homepage and its web link. On February 14, 2015, the Sunday of Presidents Day weekend, the CVB posted a banner on the home page of its website, VisitIthaca.com, that redirected visitors to the Florida Keys tourism site. The CVB posted the following message on the site, which also appeared as a sponsored \$400 Facebook boosted post:

That’s it. We surrender. Winter, you win. Key West anyone?

Due to this ridiculously stupid winter, Ithaca invites you to visit The Florida Keys this week. Please come back when things thaw out. Really, it’s for the birds here now. (Still want to visit Ithaca? Are you sure? OK, [click here.](#))

P.S. Send us a postcard.

The visual imagery showcased photographs of sunny attractions from the Florida Keys tourism council and a map of the Florida Keys and Key West with its slogan, “The southernmost city in the continental USA.” The heading with VisitIthaca.com was crossed out (see Figure 1).

Within 24 hours, stories on the “Surrender” campaign appeared on CNN and the Associated Press, and 12 hours later aired on “Good Morning America,” “CBS This Morning,” and The Weather Channel. Within two days, Ithaca became the number one trending topic on Facebook and Twitter and received the distinction of being a top-10 news story nationwide. The mayor of Ithaca was interviewed on MSNBC’s “Up with Steve Kornacki” and explained how he stood by the CVB’s initiative, while conveying positive messages about Ithaca’s tourism attractions and unique businesses. The media exposure resulted in 434 radio and TV stories, reaching a Nielsen audience of approximately 55 million, and 649 digital stories, drawing nearly 600 million impressions (Mitchell, 2016). The CVB estimated an advertising equivalency of approximately \$4 million, with \$1.7 million in broadcast, and \$2.2 million in digital media.



Figure 1. VisitIthaca.com homepage during the “Surrender” campaign.

The CVB website generated 149,000 visits within the first 48 hours, instead of its usual 1,500 hits per day in February (Hill, 2015). Overall, visits to VisitIthaca.com resulted in the CVB collecting approximately 200,000 IP addresses. Within 72 hours, these addresses became part of a targeted digital remarketing campaign that featured a sweepstakes for a four-week stay at a waterfront rental house on Cayuga Lake in Ithaca during the summer. The trip sweepstakes alone generated 50,000 hits on the CVB’s webpage. The CVB’s email marketing subscription reached 18,000 new contacts, an 85% contact increase (Mitchell, 2016).

Analysis and Discussion

What makes content go viral? Just as a flu virus can become contagious among people in close contact, viral marketing can generate brand exposure and spread quickly when the content is engaging and compelling enough for people to share. In today’s cluttered mass media and distracted social media environment, content created by any type of organization, whether a retailer or tourist board, must be appealing and share-worthy

by offering some value, such as amusement, advice, or a coupon. Viral marketing strategies encourage audiences to spread the word for an organization. As defined by Hennig-Thurau, Qwinner, Walsh, and Gremler (2004), electronic word of mouth (eWOM) refers to “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (p. 39). The CVB “surrender” campaign demonstrated that humor can work effectively as sharable content, resulting in a 20% increase in likes on Facebook—the number one influencer in VisitIthaca.com referrals—during the campaign year.

Jonah Berger (2013), author of *Contagious: Why Things Catch On*, developed principles on why content about an idea or a product becomes contagious and goes viral. Berger’s six STEPPS can be applied to the Ithaca CVB’s viral marketing campaign: 1) Social currency (sharable, desirable content), 2) Triggers (timing, memorable content), 3) Emotion (high arousal), 4) Public (accessibility), 5) Practical value (usefulness), and 6) Stories (engaging narratives).

Organizations undertaking a reverse psychology marketing campaign also need to be prepared for potential backlash. Not all members of the local tourism community reacted favorably to a campaign recommending that travelers seek the warmth of Florida during the winter. The president of Ski Areas of New York Inc. said in an interview on *Syracuse.com*: “To do this all for the sake of website hits is misguided. Just because it’s cold out doesn’t mean you have to go to Florida” (Moriarty, 2015, para. 6). However, the co-owner of Greek Peak Mountain Resort in Virgil, New York, which is the closest downhill ski area to Ithaca, stated in the *Ithaca Journal*: “We are celebrating the most snow we have had in 10 years, with record crowds....Hopefully, people will fly to Ithaca to ski, as we have more snow than places out west” (Hill, 2015, para. 17). The president of the Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce defended the CVB’s campaign in local media, stating: “I think the response has been incredible. It’s been overwhelmingly positive” (Stein, 2015, para. 7). A local retailer parodied the campaign by launching a new line of its popular “Ithaca is Gorges” T-shirts by scratching out “Ithaca” and substituting “Key West.”

The campaign also ties into the newsjacking concept coined by David Meerman Scott (2013), author of *The New Rules of Marketing & PR*.

Newsjacking essentially means taking advantage of a prominent news story by finding connections to your organization in a timely fashion. Scott explained: “If you have a legitimate tie to a breaking news story and you react in real-time—by providing additional content in a blog post, tweet, video, or media alert—journalists may find you while they are researching material for their story” (Scott, 2013, p. 349). Mainstream media stories nationwide and throughout the northeast in the winter of 2015 dramatized the situation, such as “‘It’s Biblical’: Severe Wind, Cold in Latest East-Coast Snow Storms” in an Associated Press story (Kole, Thomas, Durkin, Marcelo, & Stumm, 2015).

Without the unexpected “surrender” campaign, the CVB would have been unable to generate this volume of stories and shared content, particularly during the off-season. The CVB’s tongue-in-cheek humor seemed timely and refreshingly honest to encourage northeasterners to visit Key West during the chilliest winter days—and then explore the sights, shops, and eateries in Ithaca the rest of the year. Think about the return on investment of this campaign, with an initial investment of just \$400 for a sponsored Facebook post, excluding staff effort.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever been impressed by an eWOM effort, particularly one by a retailer or a CVB, that inspired you to share content with others? If so, what was compelling about the content?
2. What were the potential risks in a CVB undertaking a reverse psychology campaign that encourages tourists to visit another destination?
3. What other opportunities did the Ithaca CVB have to promote its winter season?
4. Viral marketing campaigns can often create impressive, but fleeting results. What strategic communication methods can the Ithaca CVB use to develop longer-term, meaningful relationships with those who encountered this viral campaign?

5. How did the CVB viral marketing campaign apply to Berger's six STEPPS on contagious content: 1) social currency, 2) triggers, 3) emotion, 4) public, 5) practical value, and 6) stories?

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Appendix. Discussion question answer guide for teachers.

1. Have you ever been impressed by an eWOM effort, particularly one by a retailer or CVB, that inspired you to share content with others? If so, what was compelling about the content?

The answer would be based on the student's first-hand experiences. It would be advisable to identify a few relatively recent eWOM examples in advance to spark conversation. Award-winning campaigns can be found on the annual [Shorty Awards website](#). Starbucks, Adidas, Toys R Us, and Red Bull are examples of a few companies active with eWOM campaigns.

2. What were the potential risks in a CVB undertaking a reverse psychology campaign that encourages tourists to visit another destination?

With the primary missions of CVBs to increase tourist arrivals and occupancy rates, they could face criticism by their travel partners and other travel-related services in their region, including airlines, hotels, retailers, restaurants, and cultural and tourist attractions. The Ithaca CVB faced public backlash, primarily from New York State ski resorts, and also some backlash from tourism partners in the region. Some of this might have been mitigated with advance communication to those partners about the plan for follow-up messages and outreach. However, the CVB also received support from the mayor and head of the county's chamber of commerce, who understood the positive impact this could have on increasing awareness of the city.

3. What other opportunities did the Ithaca CVB have to promote its winter season?

The Ithaca CVB could have developed a more costly promotion or an event that also would have required more time from the staff. It would have been challenging to generate stories in media outlets about the destination's winter attractions, particularly during this period of severe weather. A different approach on social media engagement could have been explored as well, but it may not have had the same

level of humor and curiosity value to encourage people to comment on and share the content so widely.

4. Viral marketing campaigns can often create impressive, but fleeting results. What strategic communication methods can the Ithaca CVB use to develop longer-term, meaningful relationships with those who encountered this viral campaign?

Strategic communications that are targeted and consistent in messaging create brand awareness. The CVB should look for similar in-the-moment opportunities over the course of the year to continue to drive awareness of the region. Examples might be using the power of live social video to promote the beauty of the region on the first day of summer or email campaigns highlighting harvest activities.

5. How did the CVB viral marketing campaign apply to Berger's six STEPPS on contagious content: 1) social currency, 2) triggers, 3) emotion, 4) public, 5) practical value, and 6) stories?

The witty content was sharable, while conveying Ithaca as a hip and desirable place as the northern "sister" of Key West. Timing was significant since severe winter weather stories dominated media headlines. The campaign's theme used humor, honesty, and camaraderie by facing the reality of the winter off-season. It aroused the consumer's curiosity. Messages were widely available to the public online and in more than 1,000 media outlets. The CVB's website shared useful travel information of value to prospective and repeat travelers. This campaign became an opportunity to share positive stories about Ithaca's unique qualities as a place to visit.