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YOU SAY YOU WANT A RESOLUTION

Random thoughts from a travel coach

Steve Gillick

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07 JAN 2013: Predicting the future has become the mainstay of political pundits and travel soothsayers, alike. Everyone likes to get their thoughts on record, just in case it turns out that

there is some similarity between what they said would happen, and what actually happens down the road. We can thank Nostradamus for bringing the predictions game into popularity (or notoriety) despite the fact that he died 446 years ago, but we can also thank CNN and others for keeping the tradition alive, all in the spirit of providing sound bites and creating an aura of intellectual prescience where, in many cases, none really exists.



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That being said, allow me to now jump into the fray with my own thoughts for 2013.

Terminological inexactitudes (in other words, terms that are misused, over-used and have lost any sense of precise meaning). Travel marketers will continue to bludgeon the English language with the inappropriate use of descriptive words, such as experiential, luxury, green, and more. Their strength is that these are great buzz words that evoke emotions and mind-pictures for the reader. Their weakness is that they are often used

flippantly to market products and services that deserve better or worse.

Experiential Follies: The term ‘experiential’ means ‘resulting from or derived from experience’.

Experiential travel is used to convey the idea that the traveller will enjoy unique experiences along the way. Now we know that there are hundreds of variations on what constitutes ‘travel’. Sometimes it involves discovery from a coach or from a waterway cruise; other times it may take in hiking and small hotels and some cultural interaction with the locals. But all travel is ‘experiential’. As soon as your eyes take in a new destination or attraction or for some, as soon as you arrive at a new airport, the experience begins. And experience itself means “knowledge gained from trying or testing or actual observation”.

Therefore experiential travel is, if anything, a redundancy (needlessly wordy or repetitive in expression). By the very act of travel or adventure, you are in an experiential mode. But the word is a great marketing fallback for those who want to have the client create their own meaning of the word. Therefore a cooking class in Tuscany is experiential, as is a homestay in a Lahu Village in Thailand, as is building a well in Tanzania as part of a voluntourism project. And travel marketers seem to want to load up their itineraries with as many experiential events as possible, in order to prove that their product is more experiential than the next.

Be it resolved, therefore that the next time you hear the term ‘experiential’ you take a moment to challenge the speaker about what exactly they mean, and how their version of ‘experiential’ will

satisfy the needs of your clientele. If it doesn't respond to those needs, then the product is not of much value to you.

Unique is another one of those marketing words. The word is supposed to mean "unequaled" or 'being the only one', but again, it is an over-used buzz word that is meant to trigger the client's mind into creating a personalized definition of the term. Therefore a 'unique holiday experience' means 1000 different things to 1000 different people and is, therefore quite effective when it comes to marketing that holiday experience.

Be it resolved, that in your role as a travel consultant you know what exactly is 'unique' about the product in order to properly promote it to the client. The subtle nuances that separate one product offering from another can make all the difference in your clients' enjoyment of same.

The Lure of Luxury. Every time someone presents their growth-trend-predictions for 2013, they inevitably include Luxury. And now just about everyone is toting the idea of luxury this and luxury that. I noted in a recent Keynote presentation that when I was on the Toronto subway I saw an advertisement for a can of tuna fish that had been pre-drained so that food preparer would be spared the annoyance and odour of having the liquid in the can spill on them. A woman, also looking at the ad, turned to me and said "Now that's luxury". The point being that luxury is in the eye of the beholder, but also that any incremental improvement in anything these days gets slapped with the label of 'luxury'.

In travel, if you are selling Luxury, you have to be very specific not only about what you do in the

industry, but also about the nature of the products you sell. Using that catch-all-word of luxury can backfire if you are not aware of the client's expectations.

Be it resolved that in 2013 travel consultants will challenge the use of luxury and ensure that the products or services match their client's perception of what luxury is all about. If a client who usually stays in a Motel 8 wants to upgrade to a Holiday Inn, then for them, perhaps, this luxury. Another client may choose to stay a week in the Qualia Resort on Hamilton Island in Queensland (rated by Conde Nast readers as the number one resort in the world), in order to experience luxury. Defining terms and understanding clients is essential in all aspects of selling travel.

Green Hotels. Well go figure. I stayed in a number of four and five star hotels and resorts in 2012 and just about everyone claimed to be "Green", but the only evidence of this was the ubiquitous sign in the bathroom stating that if you wanted to save the planet you could opt to re-use your towel, and if not, you could leave it on the floor to be exchanged for a freshly laundered one. All these hotels offered shampoo, conditioner and shower gel in tiny, fragranced, non-refillable bottles. No other information was provided as to why the hotel was green.

But I also stayed in a few 2-3 star properties. They too displayed these green signs but they used large refillable bottles of shampoo and soap, certainly less disturbing to plastic land fill sites than the small disposable bottles.

Hotels and Resorts seem to be embracing 'green' but perhaps only because they think that this is

what their clients want to hear. It is almost like guilt-aversion. If a client wants green, we'll give them green from a visual point of view but in fact our practices, other than perhaps changing the light bulbs to save energy costs (and not for green purposes), will remain the same.

Be it Resolved that in 2013 when a hotel presents themselves as being 'green', that you, as the travel seller, ask them what specifically a client can expect to see and experience during their stay and how this actually affects the environment and the sustainability of the local community. Some clients care.

Starry Starry Nights: The Star rating system for hotels and resorts is as unique as finger prints and snowflakes. Some systems are dictated by the local hotel association, some through a ministry or department of tourism and some by the hotels themselves. I had some nice surprises in 2012 as well as some shocks.

On the positive side, we stayed at the Niwa Hotel in Tokyo, a 4 star property that turned out to be a wonderful 4 star plus property with a soothing Japanese theme running through the property, from the Garden-like entrance (Niwa means 'garden') to the traditional lantern decor in the lobby, to the shoji-screens on the windows and colourful tea pots in the rooms.

We also stayed at the Marriott Courtyard in Ginza, Tokyo where the 4 star property again turned out to be 4 stars plus; a very comfortable small business hotel in a great location with warm decorations throughout and equally warm and friendly staff.

On the negative side we stayed in hotels and resorts where the addition of a 4th or 5th star to their literature was wishful thinking at best. While the facade of the property might have been attractive, the corridors, rooms and dining areas were 2 star in terms cleanliness and quality.

Be it Resolved, that in 2013, an international association finally take it upon itself to sign up as many countries as possible for a bone fide star-rating system for hotels and resorts that takes into consideration the entire property (and not just the lobby decorations), and that the criteria for those star awards be publicized so that travel consultants can be on the same wave length when it comes to selecting appropriate accommodation for their clients.

Travellers and Tourists I did write about this once before ([see Travel Industry Today, April 12, 2010](#)) and we still see travel companies using manipulative language to build a hierarchy amongst those who travel. Travellers are at the top; tourists are at the bottom.

With one billion people expected to cross an international border in 2013 for the purpose of travel; with growing middle classes in Malaysia and India and China, who can now afford to realize the dream of travel; with tour operators offering creative packages that cater to the thousand-and-one reasons why people want to travel; with hotels and resorts developing products and services that respond to different tastes, different incomes and different travel demographics; with airlines and cruise ships devising ways to make their products more available and to cover more areas of world - with all these good things happening in the travel and tourism industry, isn't it about time we

divested ourselves of elitist references to our clients (and to travel professionals who, after all, travel)?

Be it resolved in 2013 that we all come to the understanding that the very act of travel implies a need to do something differently and in many cases, this involves travelling to another part of the world. In that context we are all travellers. But in the sense that we are learning, discovering, sharing, conversing and bringing our own cultures with us, we are travellers but we are also tourists, pilgrims, seekers, explorers, vagabonds, global emissaries and global citizens.

Here's to another great year of travel for all.



Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.