

Final Report Lake Erie Coastal Ohio An Exploratory Research Study

"Lake Erie doesn't look like Lake Erie at Cedar Point."
Participant in Focus Group Exploring the Image of Lake Erie, 2005

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Unlike products that can be held in your hand, tourism purchases are separated from the actual product by time and space. Image-building becomes, then, a vital aspect of tourism marketing. The decision to visit a destination is based upon the mental image the potential visitor holds of the destination. If an individual believes a region will meet his or her needs, the region will be more likely to be selected as a potential destination (Hu & Ritchie, 1993.) Previous research (Gallarza et al, 2002) indicates a clear relationship between positive perceptions of destinations and purchase decisions. Negative images, even if unjustified, will deter potential tourists.

Faced with continued media exposure of Lake Erie ecological issues, a 30-year-old reputation based on international exposure created with the "burning" of the Cuyahoga River, and the lack of a Great Lakes image-building campaign, potential visitors, residents and investors may not realize the vastness, incredible beauty and abundance of recreational opportunities available along the entire Lake Erie coastline.

In 2005, Lake Erie Coastal Ohio conducted focus groups in Indianapolis, Columbus and Pittsburgh to determine the image of Lake Erie, as well as its coastal communities. First, folks in these cities still hold the perception that Lake Erie is "industrial, polluted, cold and dirty." Those in Indianapolis aren't even sure where Lake Erie is! The only tourism product that consistently generated awareness was Cedar Point. In fact, the perception in one of the Pittsburgh groups was that the water quality was poor except for around Cedar Point!

Second, advertising is driving perception. The same folks recognize Lakes Michigan and Huron as being beautiful and clean. However, Michigan invests millions of dollars in communicating with these folks with spectacular images and advertising. Ironically, during our focus groups, there was a billboard on the Indianapolis belt with a beautiful Great Lakes sunset image and the Michigan tourism web site. In January, no less! Why do you think the only awareness out there is Cedar Point? Perhaps because this attraction has done an awesome job advertising in these markets for years. However, their message is geared to the family market, not the Baby Boomer seeking nature and history – the fastest growing tourism market!

Third, these perceptions are not deeply rooted but can be reversed. After being shown video and images of Lake Erie, all groups showed an increased interest and pleasant surprise that this type of vacation area is nearby.

Fourth, it's going to take all of us working together to reverse this perception issue. Groups told us they are interested in regional attractions. "Why would I go to Toledo, when Pittsburgh has everything Toledo has?" They're interested in sites 20 to 30 minutes away from the actual shoreline, which opens up all kinds of opportunities for our regional attractions.

BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH PURPOSE

This research was undertaken by Longwoods International, Inc. on behalf of Lake Erie Coastal Ohio, Inc. Its purpose was to explore existing perceptions of and attitudes toward the Lake Erie region among prospective visitors from surrounding areas. Funding was provided by a Lake Erie Protection Fund grant from the Ohio Lake Erie Commission and Lake Erie Coastal Ohio, Inc.

METHOD

Six focus group discussions were conducted in Indianapolis (2), Columbus (2) and Pittsburgh (2) during the week of Jan. 17, 2005. Men and women were pre-screened for the following attributes:

- As travelers, meaning they had taken at least one overnight pleasure trip (other than visits to friends and relatives) in the past three years and were planning to take another within the next two years. This served to screen out individuals who are disinclined toward travel per se and would therefore have contributed little to a discussion about travel to anywhere, including Lake Erie.
- For predisposition to visiting the Lake Erie region. Definite non-intenders were excluded. Those with such strident views might have stymied the discussion and artificially biased learning.
- For interest in heritage and/or outdoor travel, defined as
 - pleasure trips with the main purpose of visiting historic, cultural, natural, recreational and scenic attractions to learn more about the past in an enjoyable way; or
 - pleasure trips with the main purpose of experiencing the natural environment where you may engage in outdoors activities such as camping, hunting, fishing, hiking, boating, rafting, skiing, snowmobiling, watching wildlife, eco-touring, or outdoor educational activities.
- Standard industry conflict rules also applied. Prospective participants were excluded if anyone in their household or immediate family worked for a marketing research company or department within a company, an advertising agency, or in the travel industry.
- There was representation within each group across a socio-demographic spectrum:
 - Singles, couples with and without children at home, and empty-nesters between 30-65 years of age;
 - A mix of education and occupation types with minimum household incomes of \$35,000 for singles and \$50,000 for couples.

By its nature, qualitative research is exploratory and directional only. It does not seek to quantify the results of the research, nor do the research results necessarily project to the attitudes and opinions of the population as a whole.

Qualitative research does, however, produce a richness and depth of response not readily available through other methods of research. It is the insight and direction provided by qualitative research that makes it an appropriate research tool for initial exploration of attitudes and issues, and as a prelude to quantitative research.

Findings

The Lake and Its Water

Lake Erie's image is largely perceived to be industrial. It seems literally used by industry for manufacturing (especially steel), processing, transport and waste.

"Lake Erie is used for industry. There were reports of medical waste washing on the shore."

"Refineries dump crap into the lake."

"Heck, remember the 'Mistake by the Lake?' The river actually caught on fire."

This usage has adversely affected (perceptions of) water quality.

"It's dirty and polluted."

And so, people's stories about the water are often horror stories about contamination and illness.

"I remember when, as a child, the lake was closed for swimming due to the pollution, and this impression has stuck with me ever since."

"Previous experiences have turned people off from going there, and I know there are many out there who refuse to come back for that reason."

"Several people got sick from swimming in the water."

"You don't eat the fish from there; you throw back what you catch."

"One of my friends got an eye infection 10 years ago from swimming in the lake."

Cleaning Up the Water

There is, on the other hand, widespread awareness of efforts to clean up the lake, but they were always spoken of in vague generalities and usually with uncertainty about the degree of progress and/or success. Questions linger in the background –

- What does success look like and when, if ever, will it be achieved?
- The lake may be cleaner, but is it clean?
- Is it safe, or safer?
- All or some of the time? When I'd be there?
- All along the lake or at certain spots? Where I'd be?

Participants recognized that the lake is cleaner . . .

"The general reputation of Lake Erie is dirty and polluted, and it's trying to recover from that reputation."

"Lake Erie has had problems throughout the years, but they've had many efforts to clear the waters."

"There was a major campaign about that (pollution and efforts to clear the waters of Lake Erie.)"

And safer.

"Well, actually, Lake Erie is really safe now, and the reason it looks dirty is because it is shallow and has a muddy bottom."

Personal experience with places around Cedar Point and the islands tend to dispel this general wariness and/or is regarded as an exception from the overall condition of the lake.

"The first time I went to Cedar Point, it was lovely, and totally not my concept of Lake Erie."

"Lake Erie doesn't look like Lake Erie at Cedar Point. First time I went there, I felt like I'd really gone somewhere, and it was beautiful with a beach like the ocean."

"As you go to Cedar Point, it looks like a vacation, but you don't go, like, Ya-hoo! Lake Erie."

"Put-in-Bay is attractive to tourists. That area has been cleaned up, but other areas are still pretty dirty."

Then, the wariness is rekindled a little every time related news erupts.

"There was a report about medical waste in the water again just a few months ago."

In the Context of the Great Lakes

One did not get a sense of any personal ownership or pride in the Great Lakes. The overall perception was that all are tarnished to a greater or lesser extent by water quality issues, even though many people admitted that the worst of these perceptions are likely dated. Nor do they remember hearing or receiving much other positive news, information, or advertising about the lakes, except for those related to Cedar Point, Lake Michigan, and wineries around the Niagara area.

With that void, old perceptions die hard.

Experience is the perfect remedy for those perceptions. And, water quality is less of an issue for all but swimming. There is as much, or more, to do around the water than in the water.

"Mackinac Island is beautiful. The lake was gorgeous, the sky was gorgeous, there were private tours with horses and carriages, rented bikes . . . somehow, I didn't think about pollution."

"I loved Mackinac Island for the peace. It's a quiet getaway where all you will hear is your clock ticking."

Degrees of Familiarity

Group participants had varying levels of familiarity with the Lake Erie region. We classified three levels of familiarity among participants.

The first level includes participants with only passing, and sometimes confused, familiarity. They recognized selected communities by name, but knew little more about them. A few didn't know these communities were on Lake Erie.

"Well, I know Cleveland is on the water, but I never thought of it as Lake Erie."

"Is Cedar Point on Lake Erie too?"

A second level includes people who had visited occasionally, as children and/or as adults, and most often that meant they had visited Cleveland, the islands area, or Cedar Point. Their visits included things like strolling about, taking in the 'touristy sights,' hiking, going to the amusement park and/or watching or being part of Put-in-Bay's nightlife. Their memories were very good ones of beautiful scenery, lots to do, and a positive experience.

The third level of familiarity includes those who are more frequent visitors. These folks also tended to get closer to nature. A couple of these people even took to defending Lake Erie against others' misconceptions.

"I go there frequently, get there in the morning, rent a kayak. I love the open water."

"There are beautiful sandy beaches and national parks for hiking through the wilderness."

Across all levels of familiarity, however, there were occasional rumblings about selected areas (usually Mackinac) becoming "too touristy." Over-development and over-commercializing risks losing the intrinsic charm and unique appeal that attracts people in the first place.

The Communities

Participants were familiar with Toledo and Cleveland. One or two had visited Toledo, and Cleveland visitors mentioned its sense of renewed energy, nightlife at The Flats, football and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Everyone had at least heard of one or all of the communities around the islands – Port Clinton, Sandusky, Cedar Point, Kelleys Island or Put-in-Bay. They think of these areas as only summer recreation areas.

Participants were familiar with Cedar Point largely because of the advertising they see directed toward them. May also now of Put-in-Bay, some by reputation only. They say they never see any advertising or promotion for other places along the lake, except for Cleveland. And what they think is not always flattering.

"One attraction doesn't make a destination. All we know of is Cedar Point, with a No-Man's Land in between."

There wasn't any sense of an inherent and unique character to the people or culture of the Lake Erie area. Comments were limited to a passing awareness of commercial fishery among a few of the men, the depressed steel industry, and depressed rural communities. These perceptions were contrasted against the summer tourist and recreation areas around the islands.

A Place in History

A sense of the lake's place in history was limited to a few names and events.

"Some connection to the War of 1812 . . . "

"Admiral Perry"

"The wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald"

One individual, however, had recently read a book on the history of the Maumee River and he talked about how the French explorers came up the river and of the Indian wars. However, even the history buffs within the groups were at somewhat of a loss. Nor did people generally remember seeing any markers, monuments or state parks along roads in the area that commemorate historical events. One many who did remember seeing markers also remembered not making the detour to see the site because he doubted it was worth it.

The Lakeside

There tended to be less, rather than more, awareness or familiarity with the flora and fauna and natural areas, except for the fishing and among true outdoor buffs. Participants seemed to regard Lake Erie as a huge mass of water, rather than a living lake with a surrounding ecosystem.

"The Great Lakes are just a backdrop for cities and industries, like steel."

"I'm shocked. I'm a national park nut. I make a point of visiting which ever ones I can, and even I didn't know that there was a national park near Lake Erie in Ohio."

For Vacation or a Getaway?

Participants viewed the coastal area as a getaway, rather than a vacation destination. The competition is stiff, especially for those three or so hours away by car. Driving access is not a problem. The region does not have a reputation for quality dining, and there is a reputation of expensive and hard-to-book lodging.

"There are golf courses, but it isn't a glamorous destination. Maybe I'd be interested to go there for a weekend, but not for a week."

"Virginia Beach has beautiful, warm, white sand beaches."

"The kids want to go where their friends have gone and to where's popular, like Disney World."

"New Orleans has sightseeing, culture, the arts, museums, old churches, cemeteries and relaxing walks along the beach."

"How do you connect these dots? How do you make a trip out of all there is to see? What is there to see that is close together, or would you have to drive empty roads between one place and another? That's some mileage to cover."

A Pleasant Surprise

Written descriptions and video footage of the coastal area were shared with participants in the latter stages of the group discussions. The video footage was funded through a Coastal Management Assistance grant, supported by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Reaction to the images was a surprise.

"These are not your grandma's lakes any more. This video has challenged all my previous beliefs of the lakes."

"I didn't know that they had wetlands . . . or wineries."

"This could be Kentucky with the lush trees and waterfalls."

"Look at the waves. Who knew there were dunes?"

The most appealing images were those of waves, waterfalls and nautical charm. Participants shared their ideas about how to increase the likelihood of their visiting the region. They suggested more Lake Erie cruises, travel books, gaming opportunities, maps and self-guided tours. They also shared thoughts about effective advertising messages and these reflected their range of interests:

"Emphasize the variety of things to see and do."

"Don't just concentrate on fishing."

"Show me a beach."

"I'm more likely to visit historical sites than a beach."

Conclusion

Absolute conversion in sentiment from one showing of a video was not expected. The "seeing" may have not made believers of all, but it certainly caused preconceived notions to be reconsidered. People are open to a new view of Lake Erie. A multi-pronged and multi-sponsor communication plan needs shaped to address key issues and opportunities identified through this research.

Lake Erie is still largely thought of as industrial, polluted, dirty and cold. Respondents themselves felt that this perception might be dated, but had not heard anything to counter this image. What they do hear about are news reports of contamination incidences. This void needs filling with communication that provides updated facts and/or casts a more favorable view of the lake and its adjacent areas. This communication needs to be consistent across all contact points of every day life, rather than from a tourism perspective only, and hence, from a range of sources with different areas and degrees of expertise, interest and credibility.

These facts may include:

- The current, true state of the lake and what that means, and of progress against targets and/or ultimate goals;
- Current conservation and preservation efforts vis a vis the lake, its waters and its adjacent ecosystems.

A public relations strategy should be considered to address and respond in a timely fashion to reported isolated incidences of contamination.

People are not familiar with the coastal area or its recreation and tourism opportunities. What they do know is often limited to Cedar Point and the islands due to advertising and promotion by private businesses. The rest of the area is largely unknown, and they have not heard any advertising or promotion about the communities or businesses in what seems again like a long time. This leaves an impression that, within at least some of the areas, is dated and lackluster, rather than contemporary and vibrant, and hence compelling to visit.

To quote a group participant, "One attraction does not a destination make." People expressed a desire to learn about the different places and things there are to see and do. They don't care about county lines, just the experience that awaits them. They want more destination choices, built itineraries that make the drive worthwhile and well-rounded, reasons to extend a trip beyond one or two days, and activities to satisfy the interests of different aged members of their travel party.

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