



COLLEGEES:

BY
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A unique collaborative education-based tourism marketing program brings colleges and cities together to attract prospective students and parents to the schools and to the hotels and attractions within their localities.

When Todd Hoffman came up with the idea of tapping into college-related tourism a decade ago in his hometown, Boston, the city's hotels were struggling through a recession. Looking back, he is surprised nobody thought of it before.

With some of the most famous colleges in the world—including Harvard and MIT—Boston is the ultimate college town. The city claims a \$300 million impact each year from college-related visits. Graduations alone are worth about \$80 million in tourism for the city, campus visits about \$90 million. “That’s a lot of money,” Hoffman points out, “and the primary beneficiary is the hotels.”

Representing three hotels in 1994, Hoffman put together a mock-up of a vis-

itors guide aimed at prospective college students and their parents and brought it to area colleges. Eight colleges agreed to help fund his proposal, a collaborative marketing effort involving a Web site (www.campusvisit.com) and print campaign with brochures and a magazine mailed annually to high school juniors, marketing Boston to college visitors.

“Partner colleges” agreed to pay an annual membership fee for a listing on the Web site, inclusion in the annual magazine and printed materials and use of the Boston-based travel desk which helps college visitors make travel arrangements, often at discount. Approved hotels were asked to act as “ambassadors” to the city, offering special treatment and discounts to Campus Visit guests. Amtrak kicked in with half-price fares and U.S. Airways offered a five percent discount.



plan their visits—and to sell them on how cool each of these cities are.

A perception-reality gap

It was not Boston, however, but Philadelphia, a far-less recognized college city, that brought Campus Visit—and the concept of collaborative education-based tourism marketing—into the national spotlight. A 1999 study revealed that metropolitan Philadelphia has as many colleges as Boston (50) but an even denser concentration. In fact, the Philadelphia region boasts the highest per capita concentration of higher education institutions in the U.S. Even leaders of higher education seemed unaware of this bragging point and the city's hospitality industry had barely considered local colleges' contributions to tourism.

Following publication of the study, Campus Visit Inc. was contacted by the Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corp. (GPTMC) in early 2000. "The GPTMC had just been hammered in the local paper," Hoffman recalls, referring

prestige of big-ticket real estate and fine restaurants, but there were still shady areas downtown and a lackluster nightlife for such a populated city.

Then, in the early 1990s, neighborhoods like Manayunk and Old City were renovated and turned into boutique districts with distinct, artsy personalities. Under the stewardship of master marketer, then-mayor Ed Rendell, a strip of musical venues and theaters along Broad Street were revived and promoted as the "Avenue of the Arts." Restaurants, galleries and nightclubs began to appear in these neighborhoods, improving the nightlife and cultural scene—and young professionals began moving downtown.

Local perception of the city continues to improve, but on the national radar, Philadelphia, still personifies crime, urban decay and the kind of culture Rocky personified: greasy cheesesteaks and sentences that begin with 'yo.' "Changing a mindset about a city usually takes a generation," says Hoffman.

At the time GPTMC was planning a

A Tourism Goldmine

Campus Visit Inc. was born.

It was easy to promote Boston as a network of college-related opportunities. There are, after all, "50 great colleges within 50 square miles," as the Web site boasts. "Anyone who grew up in Boston knows colleges are an industry there," he says. "In Detroit, you have cars, in Nashville, music. In Boston, when we were talking about opportunities for getting new people into hotels, it was the untapped market of college visitors that came to mind."

Campus Visit's home-based program, which now has 16 member colleges, set the standard for the programs it established in Philadelphia in 2000 and Pittsburgh in 2001, and is creating for Baltimore. Hoffman expects to publish more than a million copies of *Campus Visit* magazine in 2003, to help 17-year-olds

to an article in the *Daily News* titled "Why Isn't Philly Building a Better Student Magnet?" Meryl Levitz, president of the GPTMC, called Hoffman.

In terms of the colleges themselves, Philadelphia was a marketer's dream but public perception of the city itself proved challenging. "Boston was a different situation," Hoffman says. "The colleges liked the program but they didn't really need it. It was a nice-to-have, not a must-have. It was Philadelphia that needed it."

"There is a serious perception-reality gap regarding Philadelphia," he explains. "People don't appreciate it for what it is until they get there. From 1970 to 1995, Philly wasn't a place you wanted to send kids." Some would argue that the reality began to improve well before that. Old neighborhoods like Rittenhouse Square and Society Hill had long enjoyed the

TV spot targeting prospective college students and their parents. "But they realized they weren't going to reach many people efficiently," Hoffman says. He convinced them instead to invest a portion of that quarter million in his grassroots program and invite local colleges to match funds.

Around this time, the University of Pennsylvania contacted Campus Visit independently. The university agreed to help the GPTMC fund the program, whether or not other colleges were interested. Eleven local colleges attended a presentation at Penn in fall 1999. Ten signed up on the spot; the last, Bryn Mawr, joined later. There are now 18 member colleges, Campus Visit's largest group.

Swarthmore College, one of several small colleges along the Mainline west of

Philly, was among the first paid members of the new program, titled One Big Campus. Swarthmore's director of admissions loved the idea, as did its publicity director, Tom Krattenmaker. "I think the proximity of Philadelphia has had a neutral impact on Swarthmore admissions so far," Krattenmaker says. "But the college's biggest competitors among liberal arts colleges, Williams and Amherst, are in fairly remote locations. So if Philly developed a hot reputation as a great place to go to college, it would become a competitive advantage for us."

Within the first year, Campus Visit's "travel desk" was fielding 500 calls per month from visitors planning trips to Philadelphia colleges. "Eighty percent of the kids visiting these colleges are from outside the market. Their parents are all worried about sending them away. By exposing them to Philadelphia, we can help them overcome their fears. We help people have more enjoyable visits and leave with favorable impressions of the schools and the city. That, of course, will stand out later when they have to make a decision."

One Big Campus is Campus Visit's largest and most ambitious project to date. In Philadelphia, affiliated hotels hand out Campus Visit bags with disposable cameras, the magazine, discount coupons and a letter of welcome from the mayor. Next year, the city's orchestra, ballet and opera companies will make deeply discounted "student sampler" tickets available through One Big Campus. Campus Visit and its Philadelphia partners are focusing more attention on established college students and planning to target graduate students and alumni next. "We're hoping to get the alumni from the eighties to come back to campus," Hoffman says. "We'll invite press from around the country who studied in Philly so they can see that the city has changed."

Beyond steel: the starter city

After the success of the One Big Campus launch, Hoffman's team was called in to help with another Pennsylvania city strug-



gling with a bad reputation: Pittsburgh. Contacted by the city's CVB, Hoffman set up a pilot program based on the tagline "Pittsburgh: The College City," creating a Pittsburgh version of the Campus Visit magazine and a Web site called www.thecollegecity.com. Like the sites for Boston and Philadelphia, this one maps out Pittsburgh's attractions from the college visitor's point of view.

Pittsburgh too has a high concentration of students, 120,000 students and 32 colleges in the region, according to Hoffman. "We believe that if a city has ten or more schools than it becomes a story the public will believe." (Baltimore, the latest city to sign on, produced 13 member colleges and claims 100,000 students in the region.)

Pittsburgh, however, had a different set of problems than its neighbor. While the perception of Philadelphia was "by and large negative," Hoffman explains, "Pittsburgh has no identity whatsoever. People go to Carnegie Mellon in spite of Pittsburgh—not that they have anything against it, they just figure they might as well be going to Williams or Amherst. The city has no influence—which means that they under-appreciate what the city has to offer."

According to its CVB, Pittsburgh has "more culture per capita than any other city in America," due mainly to the largesse left by steel magnates Andrew

Mellon and Andrew Carnegie. "The issue there is to put Pittsburgh on the map," says Hoffman.

"It's a moderate-size, very manageable city—everything you'd want in a city but not too much," he says. "It's everybody's starter city. You're 17, you want a city to be comfortable with before you go off to New York. That's step one, because if you become part of the city and get to know it, become part of the work community, the arts community, you're very likely to stay. That's what happens in Boston. It would take a lot of incentive to get most college graduates in Boston to go elsewhere. There are too many reasons to stick around."

While Philly's image problem comes from insiders as well as outsiders—native Philadelphians love to bad-mouth the city—Pittsburgh's is primarily external. "When you go to Pittsburgh and talk to the people about their city, you hear nothing but good things," Hoffman claims. "Kids there thought Pittsburgh had everything they needed; they didn't need to go elsewhere."

Attracting new blood to Pittsburgh is the problem facing Bill Flanagan, CCO for the Allegheny Conference on Community Development. He is spearheading an imaging campaign for the region and sees Campus Visit as "the leading edge as well as part of the implementation."

"Pittsburgh is still known externally for what it was known for 30 years ago: steel and manufacturing," says Flanagan. A few years ago, the CVB did market research and found "a lingering perception of Pittsburgh as a smoky industrial center known for steel and sports—like the Steelers—and not much awareness that it's also a thriving cultural center and a center for higher education." It's an image that has made it difficult to attract new businesses, especially service and technology, not to mention leisure travelers. "Who wants to vacation in a manufacturing center?" Flanagan laughs.

An "image gap committee" of 15 tourism promotion organizations and 55

senior marketing executives from a variety of organizations convened in April. “We have a very fragmented marketing system in this region,” Flanagan says. “More than 100 entities are telling the story of the region, each coming up with a different message aimed at their target audiences. As a result, we have a complex and confusing message going out. With so many different constituencies, we’re having a hard time agreeing on the name of the region—Pittsburgh, Metropolitan Pittsburgh, etc.—let alone the sales pitch. It’s tempting to pick the least offensive platform just to get everyone to agree, but then you’re not accomplishing anything because it doesn’t resonate with the public.”

Campus Visit’s Pittsburgh initiative became a kind of pilot program, Flanagan says, largely because it provided an example. “Ten colleges and universities in the region actually managed to come up with a position and an approach to use collectively,” he says. “We’ve been working closely with them all along.” When the committee convenes in February 2003, the new regional message will be introduced into Campus Visit materials. But because Campus Visit is so heavily involved, Flanagan says, “I don’t expect the result to be all that different. My guess is they’ll do more to inform the regional branding message than vice versa.”

Measuring the effect

One difficulty for Campus Visit is justifying the annual membership fee to colleges who demand evidence of admissions payoffs. “Personally, I think that schools participate in a program like this because it’s part of being a good citizen of the area,” says Swarthmore’s Tom Krattenmaker. “I don’t think colleges can expect concrete admissions payoffs in four years. To change the reputation of an area is a huge, long-term project. In the early going, you just have to have faith in the idea. It takes a long time to effect a change in the national consciousness.”

Campus Visit points to the number of calls to its travel desk and visits to its Web sites. Philadelphia’s

Onebigcampus.com receives more than 220,000 hits annually. “There are also indicators we look at from an admissions standpoint—visitors on campus, number of applicants, whether that’s changed—but it’s purely speculation,” Hoffman admits. “The best indicator of how we’ve impacted admissions is the number of people who’ve been accepted who choose to go there. If we can increase that number by even 2 percent, we’ll take some credit for that. Because the school won’t have changed, only the environment around it—or the perception of it.”

Better than a convention

Washington D.C., Atlanta and New York have all contacted Campus Visit. For now, Hoffman is taking on one new city each year. He predicts that college-based tourism will be commonplace eventually. “Twenty-five years ago, ‘I Love NY’ was the first regional tourism effort. Now every region in America has a CVB. You can’t go anywhere without finding some collective marketing effort aimed at tourism. That will be the case ten years from now when it comes to college-associated travel—because the impact is so great.”

One college student attending from out of state will have a \$50,000 annual impact, Hoffman claims: “You don’t get that from a conventioner.” Cities’ emphasis on convention promotion is a pet peeve. “Everybody plays follow the

leader to attract convention visitors,” he says. “CVBs are obsessed with attracting outside money into the region by getting convention visitors for a couple days. But the impact of any convention pales beside what they could get from one college’s graduation. The difference is, those college visitors started coming four years earlier, so you not only have people who come en masse but repeatedly.

“If you work with colleges from the beginning, which is our approach, you’re building an alliance with a frequent traveler who spends multiple hundreds of dollars in the region over the course of four years. You’ve got international students who return to their countries and enter business or government. When they’re looking to parlay their relationships back in the states, their first effort is usually focused on where they went to school. That impact can equal many millions of dollars. Every international student is worth, on average, 45 trips by friends and family in the course of their lifetime.”

You might say colleges are recession-proof. “After September 11 (2001), when most of the leisure audience stopped traveling, parents continued to visit their kids,” Hoffman points out. Colleges are an unusually stable destination—well-established, requiring no financial outlay by the city; the infrastructure is already in place. Industry will come and go, Hoffman says, “but colleges are rooted in their communities. Their endowments and nonprofit status is strong enough for most to remain independent. They won’t move.”

As Pittsburgh and Philly have both discovered, keeping a city vital and dynamic means appealing to a youthful culture—and a city’s colleges are a goldmine where that’s concerned. “Everything that’s cool about a city can usually be traced to the environment of its youth—whether it’s Austin, Boston, Seattle or San Francisco—and the engine behind that is the colleges,” Hoffman says. “We truly believe this is an emerging market. We believe in the ultimate impact—but it isn’t going to happen tomorrow.” ■

