Case Study

A Picture Is Worth A Thousand Shares: The Case of Destination Canada's Social Media Visual Storytelling Campaign

Michael W. Lever, PhD[1] and Statia Elliot, PhD[1]

Abstract
This case is designed to assess the visual storytelling social media strategy created by Destination Canada (DC), the country's national destination marketing organization, regarding their objective, to drive demand among international travelers, to uncover insights into how it has performed since the devastating impact of COVID-19, and how the future might unfold. DC curates and shares a variety of unique photos and videos to their Instagram page on a near-daily basis, inspiring users to connect emotionally with the brand, develop a desire to visit, and ultimately choose to travel to Canada. Despite success to date with their strategy, DC has faced unprecedented challenges in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, which have made their path forward unclear. In this case, students will draw upon visual storytelling and social media engagement concepts in tourism and marketing to examine key data related to DC's campaign and Instagram engagement across their posts, and ultimately piece together the key information required to evaluate the effectiveness of DC's campaign, along with where changes may be needed for DC to remain engaged with users post-pandemic.

Introduction: Harnessing the Power of Visual Storytelling

Consumer brand communication has moved away from decision-leading persuasion and toward offering a holistic brand experience (Lim & Childs, 2020). Social media are becoming essential for destination marketing organizations (DMOs) to provide this holistic experience to potential visitors. The potential for increasing travel demand has fueled the proliferation of social media activity across most major DMOs, including Destination Canada (DC), Canada's national destination marketing organization. Effective social media strategy can inspire a desire to travel to Canada. Therefore, getting it right is important.

In 2019, DC released its 5-year corporate plan, focusing on a new strategy to drive demand for Canada among the fast-growing high-spending international travelers to complement their existing large US traveler segment. Their proposed strategy over the 2019 to 2023 period will be to expand international visitation into rural and secondary regions in Canada and to strengthen travel in shoulder seasons (Destination Canada, 2019a). One of the ways they intend to achieve this is by increasing demand for Canada with innovative marketing. DC follows a multi-channel approach in all their markets that includes direct-to-consumer campaigns, business-to-business programs, and earned media to drive the

Canada travel brand. While their channel strategy is integrated and globally aligned, they tailor their content strategy and channel investments for maximum impact and return. According to DC, they are constantly looking to evolve their marketing to become more innovative in the digital marketing space.

They say a picture is worth a thousand words, but what about one *really* great story instead? Destination marketers recognize the positive outcomes of using storytelling and have increasingly used this strategy for their brands (Elliot, 2009). As an effective form to deliver messages, stories allow the narrator (in this case, the destination marketer) to build a plot and to establish characters, which in turn take the audience through a narrative process ultimately leading to an emotional connection with the brand (Kang et al., 2020). But why is it important for brands to establish this emotional connection? The answer lies in the cognitive and affective

[1]University of Guelph, ON, Canada

Michael W. Lever and Statia Elliot are now affiliated to Fairleigh Dickinson University (Vancouver Campus), BC, Canada.

Corresponding Author:
Michael W. Lever, Fairleigh Dickinson University (Vancouver Campus), 842 Cambie Street, Vancouver, BC V6B 2P6, Canada.
Email: m.lever@fdu.edu

associations of the brand which reflect individuals' perceptions, forming an overall destination brand image (Qu et al., 2011). When stronger brand associations are established, a positive image toward the destination may be achieved. In this way, an effective visual storytelling campaign should increase these favorable brand associations to establish a positive image of the destination's brand.

To build positive brand image, DC has evolved its social media marketing, from showing travelers what they can do in Canada to showing them how Canada will make them feel, as expressed through visual storytelling. Outside of social media, DC has already had success with this brand evolution through their original travel series titled "Vacations of the Brave," which premiered in 2018 on Amazon Prime Video (Destination Canada, 2018). The series was aimed at motivating travelers to set out on their own transformational journeys of adventure, inspiration, and self-discovery in Canada by following real American heroes who have made a positive difference at home, on a quest through various Canadian locations. Each episode features a different hero on their unique journey of discovery in Canada as they meet people and places that challenge themselves physically and emotionally. The series showcased the best of Canada's landscape, culture, and people by highlighting the country's multiculturalism through food, festivals, and events.

Given the relatively limited engagement of their TV campaign, DC has its sights set next on social media, which will allow for a deeper engagement between them and potential visitors, and the ability to showcase a large variety of unique Canadian destinations regularly to potential travelers from around the globe. While in the midst of launching their visual storytelling social media campaign, the unexpected happened: this past year, the Canadian visitor economy has been facing unprecedented challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had a devastating effect on DC's strategic goals, as international travel, in particular, has largely grinded to a halt (Destination Canada, 2021a).

The purpose of this case is to assess DC's visual storytelling social media strategy regarding their objective to drive demand among international travelers, to uncover insights into *how* it has performed since the devastating impact of COVID-19, and how the future might unfold. Insights can be gained by analyzing:

- The effectiveness of DC's visual storytelling elements posted on Instagram in terms of content (emotion, focus, and action);
- Which of DC's posts are generating the most/least engagement (likes and comments) during the distinct phases of the pandemic; and,
- The effectiveness of the social media campaign to encourage visitors to experience Canada's range of products, from nature to culinary.

Overview of DC and Its Target Market

As Canada's national tourism marketer, DC's mission is to influence supply and build demand for the benefit of locals, communities, and visitors through leading research, alignment with public and private sectors, and marketing Canada both nationally and abroad. In terms of their values, DC emphasizes the importance of building trust, remaining passionately committed to their shared passion and pride for Canada in inspiring and encouraging others, leading boldly as they approach their work with courage and curiosity, and collaborating with others to ensure their results represent a diverse array of perspectives, experiences, and contributions.

DC is a catalyst to inspire global travelers to choose Canada. Their role is to stimulate economic diversity and opportunity by driving increased tourism export revenue as part of the federal government's priority to strengthen Canada's global competitiveness in the leisure and business travel sector. In terms of focus, DC targets 10 leisure markets: Australia, China, France, Germany, India, Japan, Mexico, South Korea, the UK, and the US. Each of these countries has indicated different priorities in regard to the drivers of their desires to travel abroad. For instance, the presence of many great attractions to see and do was top of mind for South Koreans, whereas Australians and Japanese noted the opportunity to de-stress as their key motivator (Destination Canada, 2019b). Table 1 summarizes the top 3 drivers for each of DC's targeted international travel markets.

"For Glowing Hearts" and Current Social Media Strategy

According to DC, they have "tapped into what it means to be Canadian and evolved [their] consumer brand to inspire even more international travelers to visit Canada" (Destination Canada, 2021b). DC's Instagram feed features the best in-season photos and videos from around Canada every day. All posts are curated based on content shared on the platform using #ExpsloreCanada. To activate their brand, DC uses three tactics to inspire audiences to take the path to purchase: emotion content, focus content, and action content. Each tactic is outlined in Table 2.

The DC Instagram page can be found here: https://www.instagram.com/explorecanada/. Currently, DC focuses on the following product categories: (i) nature, (ii) attractions, (iii) culture, (iv) adventure, (v) cities, and (vi) food and drink. Users are encouraged to get involved by tagging their posts with the #ExploreCanada hashtag, and sharing their photos and videos @ExploreCanada, where DC will curate and feature their favorites on their page.

To encourage storytelling, DC has created the hashtag #ForGlowingHearts where users' stories can be shared that

Table 1. Top Drivers for International Travelers, by Country.[a]

	South Korea	Australia	China	France	Germany	Japan	Mexico	UK	USA
1	Its cities have a lot of great attractions to see and do	Is a place that allows me to de-stress	Is a place to spend quality time with friends and/or family	Is a place I would be proud to tell people I have visited	Is a safe place to visit	Is a place that allows me to de-stress	Is a place I would be proud to tell people I have visited	Is a place I would be proud to tell people I have visited	Is a place I would be proud to tell people I have visited
2	It's a great place for touring around to multiple destinations	Has people that are friendly and welcoming	Is a great place for regular vacations that avoid surprises	Is a place that allows me to de-stress	Offers adventures that everyone can enjoy	Has great shopping	Offers good value for money	Has great shopping	Is a place that allows me to de-stress
3	Is a place I would be proud to tell people I have visited	Is a place I would be proud to tell people I have visited	Is a place that allows me to de-stress	Its cities are great for exploring and soaking in the atmosphere	Has people that are friendly and welcoming	Has people that are friendly and welcoming	Has a unique culture that I would want to experience on a vacation	Is a place that allows me to de-stress	Has a unique culture that I would want to experience on a vacation

[a]Excludes India due to lack of available data.

capture Canadian moments that have stayed with them since returning home and had a lasting mark on their hearts. Aside from these two opportunities for users to engage with DC through their Instagram page, they maintain an active feed of new photos and videos to share with their users. For each content tactic (Emotion, Focus, and Action), the messaging of each Instagram post considers three key factors:

1. Feeling: content that captures the feeling and emotion of travel in Canada;
2. People: content that demonstrates the passion of Canadian travelers; and,
3. Places: content that is clearly Canadian, beauty, and diversity of landscape to support the story.

The following post (see Figure 1) is an example of content shared by DC on their Instagram page, shared on July 21st, 2020 featuring an unnamed individual taking a relaxing stroll on a summer beach right before sunrise. In the post, DC asks users to indicate their own favorite local spots to enjoy a beautiful sunrise or sunset:

Along with the photos, they describe the destination being featured and allow for engagement with users in the form of likes, comments, and sharing abilities. Table 3 shows every sixth post from DC's Instagram page over a 10-month period, showing a variety of visual depictions within these posts:

With the growing popularity of visual content strategies in social media marketing (Lim & Childs, 2020), DC feels confident that their Instagram approach will enable more engagement with their user base, and are continually adjusting to maximize its potential.

DC'S Dilemma

Research insights tell us that travelers want a deeper connection with places through a change of perspective and self-reflection. This shift from experiential travel to transformative travel will impact how DC engages with its target travelers going forward. As DC adjusts to the destructive impact of COVID-19 on the international travel market, their next steps are uncertain. In normal circumstances, narrative storytelling leads to positive social media attitudes and visit intentions (Huang et al., 2018), but these are not normal circumstances. Questions for DC to consider are:

A. Overall, does their Instagram campaign reflect the desired content, product focus, and messaging as outlined by DC? Why or why not?
B. Referring to Table 1, classifying the top travel drivers by each of the three Instagram content factors: feeling, people, and places. What stands out to you after classifying each one? What priority are feelings in relation to the other two factors? Does this

Table 2. DC Content Tactics (with Examples).

Content tactic	Description	Sample photo descriptions from DC's Instagram page	How the post reflects this tactic
Emotion content	Storytelling designed to evoke an emotional connection to Canada (I want to feel that)	Post from November 16, 2020: *"Incredible shot of the South Nahanni River as it winds through the dramatic mountains of Nahanni National Park, taken last year on a tour with @simpsonair. Hands up if a flight over these beautiful, rugged mountains in the Northwest Territories has just been added to your bucket list!"*	Incredible views and dramatic/beautiful mountains are vividly depicted in this post, intended to encourage potential visitors to feel inspired and in awe of this unique landscape.
Focus content	Storytelling content with people and/or places to support the decision-making process (I want to experience that)	Post from September 2, 2020: *"Summer might be drawing to a close but there's still plenty to see and do in Montreal! If you're local to this beautiful, dynamic city, here's how to make the most of the warm days and long evenings: Treat yourself to an ice cream from a food truck. Dip your toes in the sand at Verdun Beach for that vacation vibe. Visit an open-air museum - Galerie Blanc (@galerie_blanc) features incredible photography and art installations in an outdoor environment."*	A number of trendy places across Montreal are depicted throughout each of the photos from this post to encourage visitors to be able to experience, say, an open-air museum or a trip to Verdun Beach.
Action content	Specifics of the story to support the final action (I want to book that)	Post from September 24, 2020: *"Vancouver's (@inside_vancouver) seawall is a great spot for a leisurely cycle. Head to Stanley Park for a perfect 10 km (6 mile) stretch of path that circles the park, offering spectacular views of the Lionsgate Bridge and the iconic mountains on the North Shore."*	Specific aspects of the destination, including the exact distance of Stanley Park's bike path, help to encourage potential visitors to make the choice to book the destination by providing key information that will help them decide where to go.
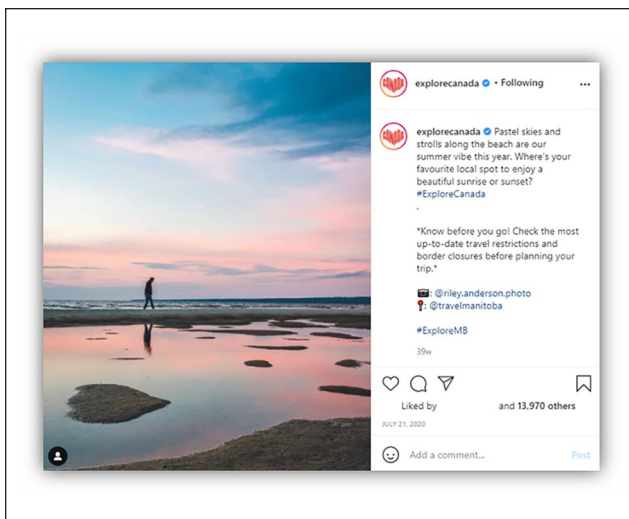
Figure 1. Sample DC Instagram post (Photo Riley Anderson Photography©).

align with DC's goal of connecting to the emotional side of travelers? Why or why not?

C. Conduct an analysis using Table 3 by selecting one post from each of the three COVID-19 phases and locating the associated post on DC's Instagram page. What are the main visual elements used in the photos? Were there multiple photos or a single one for each post? How did the number of likes and/or comments compare to the average? What are the major visual differences among the three posts?

D. Thinking about the theory of narrative storytelling, can you explain why social media sites like Instagram are a better way to share personalized stories versus other textual-based forms of social media, such as Twitter?

E. Are there any commonalities among posts with higher (lower) levels of engagement? What do you believe leads to higher (lower) engagement among these posts?

Table 3. Summary of DC Instagram Posts from Data Collection.

Phase	Date (2020)	Visual depiction	Location depicted	Number of likes	Number of comments
Peak- 1	03-12	Northern lights above a snow-covered landscape	Churchill, Manitoba	22,899	231
Peak 1	03-19	Flowers and cherry blossoms in bloom	Montreal, Quebec	18,987	128
Peak 1	04-23	Miscellaneous city architecture	Montreal, Quebec	22,302	343
Peak 1	05-20	Gros Morne National Park (man in foreground)	Newfoundland and Labrador	28,446	396
Valley	06-12	Parliament Hill and surrounding area	Ottawa, Ontario	29,134	422
Valley	07-03	View of CN Tower and Rogers Center from Centre Island	Toronto, Ontario	29,103	338
Valley	07-21	Lone person walking along beach	Canada	14,093	82
Valley	07-30	Lighthouse on sandy beach	Canada	12,533	114
Valley	08-07	Various sights of mountain area	Whistler, British Columbia	18,774	255
Valley	08-17	Remai Modern (museum)	Saskatoon, Saskatchewan	5,807	42
Valley	08-25	Video showcasing paddling on Sudbury Basin	Sudbury, Ontario	8,086	120
Valley	09-02	Various trendy locations	Montreal, Quebec	8,422	105
Peak 2	09-10	Cape Breton Highlands and Cape Split	Nova Scotia	21,492	185
Peak 2	09-16	Lake Louise with Canadian Rockies in background	Banff, Alberta	23,747	205
Peak 2	09-24	Lone bike rider with colorful houses in background	Canada	10,735	73
Peak 2	10-02	Autumn views	Canada	16,225	133
Peak 2	10-12	Marble Mountain Resort autumn leaves	Newfoundland and Labrador	23,384	142
Peak 2	10-20	Girl sitting on cliff edge with farm fields in distance	New Brunswick	15,582	82
Peak 2	10-30	Various buildings with "spooky" histories	Canada	16,414	93
Peak 2	11-06	Traveling various locations by foot	Canada	16,433	107
Peak 2	11-16	Aerial view of South Nahanni River	Nahanni National Park, Northwest Territories	20,028	126
Peak 2	11-24	Black bear cub sitting in the grass	Gaspésie National Park, Quebec	20,172	147
Peak 2	12-03	Snowy landscape with mountains in background	Yukon	15,338	92
Peak 2	12-15	Canadian delicacies: BeaverTails, Nanaimo bars, and butter tarts	Canada	10,544	223
Peak 2	12-22	Various perspectives of the falls	Niagara Falls, Ontario	14,730	159
Peak 2	12-30	Polar bear lying on the snow	Churchill, Manitoba	17,677	138
Peak 2	01-08 (2021)	Northern lights in the night sky	Canada (Northern regions)	27,637	337

F. How best should the DMO engage on social media to encourage users to turn their engagement into actual visit behavior?

G. How can visual and storytelling elements help DC with their overall strategy to expand visitation into secondary regions in Canada and to strengthen travel in shoulder seasons?

If you are an ICHRIE member, you can access the Teaching Notes for this case study here: https://ichrie.memberclicks.net/jhtc. If you are not an ICHRIE member, the Teaching Notes will be published in a future Sage Business Cases (SBC) annual collection: https://sk.sagepub.com/cases. For more information, please contact info@sagepub.com

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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