

dale a. brill

Readying ambitious plans to attract more international visitors to Florida, country by country

How hard could it be to sell Florida tourism nationally and internationally? After all, what's not to love about Florida? The answer might be deceptive in light of international terrorism, a failing U.S. image abroad, skyrocketing gas prices, an intense hurricane season, and a stagnant global economy.

When Dale Brill became senior vice-president of marketing for Visit Florida a year ago, he stepped into a job in a seven-year-old private-public partnership that was struggling with political and economic issues not of its own making, but with enthusiastic moral and financial support from Florida's tourism industry.

The message was already out there: Florida is a great place to visit. That was pretty much a thumbsucker. Brill and his staff and creatives at Fahlgren Benito in Tampa want to make it even more exciting.

"Florida has everything to offer except maybe Alpine skiing," jokes Brill, a former professor of advertising and interactive communication at Florida State University.

"Our creative strategy is consistent in domestic and international markets: the variety of experience you can have in Florida. We've worked to overcome the concept that Florida is uni-dimensional," says Brill.

The diversity of Florida is at the heart of the Visit Florida campaign. In a series of rainbow colored ads, Brill and his predecessors at Visit Florida targeted the "people who think Florida is a beach" and "people who think they've already experienced Florida."

The colors of Florida rainbow-colored print campaign created by Fahlgren Benito was test marketed in New York, with impressive results, double digits above industry standards for being attention getting, eye catching, interesting and unique.

It's been so successful in Europe that a British travel agency adopted the logo and slogan and a major portion of the art, with Visit Florida's enthusiastic permission. "We'd like to see even

more of that kind of copycat free advertising," comments Brill.

After weathering a couple of rough years post 9-11, last year was a record year for Florida tourism, and this year, Brill says expectations are still on track for an even better year. "Florida's tourists are still overwhelmingly American. International visitors account for 8% of the market, and that number is steadily growing.

"The influx of visitors comes at a time when the U.S. government isn't that popular overseas. But Europeans are good at separating governments from peoples," explains Brill. "People tend to say to us, "Our governments tend to disagree, but we love Florida."

Brill hopes to tap into what he considers a pent-up post-9-11 demand that he expects will open soon, particularly with German tourists. Visit Florida is so invested in attracting the German market that it has recently re-opened its German public relations office, closed in the aftermath of 9-11.

"We're continuing to leverage our operations in the U.K. and Canada, too," he adds.

About 1/3 of the Florida's foreign visitors are Canadians. "Florida is so popular with Canadians that they're thinking of annexing us," Brill jokes.

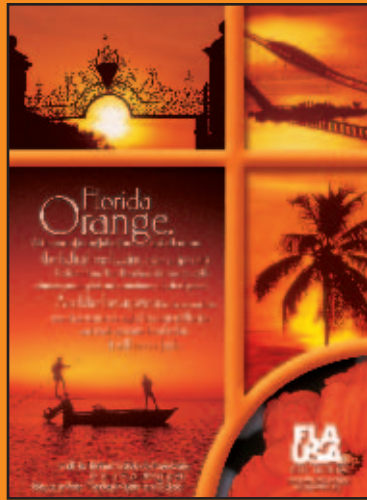
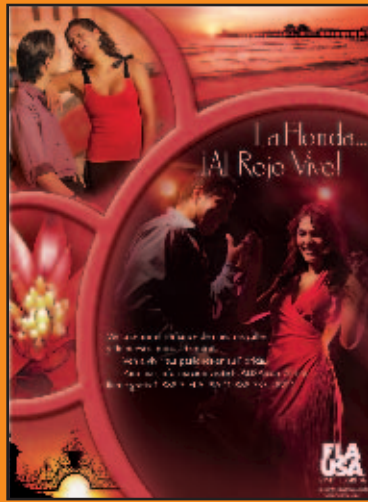
Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico are next on Brill's expansion list since "there's a large market there ready to be tapped."

Brill admits Visit Florida has "a little brand confusion" associated with the logo FLA USA.

"People tried to make it a word and it just

Dale Brill is charged with promoting the beauty, fun, and fantasy that is Florida.





Visit Florida's colorful campaign carries a message about the diversity of activities the state offers.

didn't make sense. It's outdated and relates to a postal code that hasn't been used for 30 years," says Brill, aware he's treading on dangerous ground.

"I know, I know, I'm the new kid on the block and the first thing I want to do is change the logo," Brill concedes.

"I inherited this campaign and it's a lovely thing to inherit," he says. "It clearly has legs, but as we extend it through the next fiscal year, I think we need to better understand our brand equity."

From now on, the FLA USA logo will always

be accompanied by the true logo: Visit Florida. It may change even more in the coming months.

The "Visit Florida" universal and global message targets mainly North American, European, and limited South American print markets in slick travel publications, but Brill has plans to extend the currently limited television campaign—and he's eyeing more South American and Asian markets.

There are also plans to jazz up the website, add the Colors of Florida campaign and, eventually to lose the FLA USA concept altogether. Those plans include making the website more interactive and using smart technology to tailor the website to the interests of visitors.

Visit Florida is a unique business entity. It's a private-public partnership spun off from the state of Florida seven years ago.

"Gov. Lawton Chiles believed state government can't run a tourism marketing organization better than the tourism industry itself," says Brill.

The state legislature allocated a budget of 15.75% of the \$2 per day surcharge applied to rental cars—31 cents a day—about \$18 million the first year. But there was a major string attached. Privatization meant private industry had to match the public funding dollar for dollar within five years.

Visit Florida exceeded that goal in 2 years and now receives \$3 in industry contributions for every dollar of state money because private industry got behind Visit Florida in a big way.

"We have 3,360 partners, ranging from Disney World, Sea World, and Busch Gardens to Steve's Bed and Breakfast," Brill explains. "They pay to participate, and we leverage their buying power, regardless of their size."

Visit Florida reported a \$74.5 million advertising budget in 2003, up slightly from 2002, but nearly 10% above the 2001 figure.

"We're unique in the U.S. in this sense and because we're charged exclusively with marketing tourism. We don't do economic development or real estate. It's simply promoting the beauty, fun, and fantasy that is the State of Florida to international, domestic, and in-state markets," explains Brill.

He pauses a moment and adds, "I think we're doing it pretty well." ●