

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

# U.S. Travel Association's Travel Effect

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A Public Relations Campaign Analysis

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## **Travel Effect: Campaign Overview**

### **Background**

The "Travel Effect" campaign began in 2012 as a multi-million dollar effort by the U.S. Travel Association to increase the number of Americans traveling throughout the U.S. Beginning with an understanding of American work culture, the campaign commissioned research to support the notion that Americans often do not use all their paid time off. The U.S. Travel Association used several research studies to develop messages to the American public that was aimed at encouraging American workers to take off all their paid time off and travel in the U.S.

### **Challenge / Opportunity**

The U.S. Travel Association realized that the American work culture was an obstacle that prevented millions of Americans from traveling every year. The U.S. Travel Association inferred that Americans were not using up all their paid time-off, largely, in an effort to demonstrate their dedication to their work in hopes of improving their job security. This cultural behavior resulted in millions of less vacations and millions of less dollars going into U.S. tourism and the U.S. economy. The U.S. Travel Association determined that if they could convince Americans to change their perceptions about taking their paid time off, that they would travel more.

### **Objectives**

The main objective of the Travel Effect campaign was to increase travel within the U.S. by Americans. The objective was not to get Americans to use all their paid time off. The message approach highlighted research about Americans in order to get Americans to take the necessary steps to traveling more. The target audience for this campaign according to Robert is quite simply, Americans. According to Mr. Bobo, the target audience was not further specified and further segmented.

## **Target Audience**

The U.S. Travel Association is the organization behind the "Travel Effect" campaign and aimed increase travel within the U.S. among Americans. They realized that a major barrier preventing Americans from traveling was Americans' commitment to their work. This campaign used data-driven messages to target Americans and change the way they view taking time off work so that they will be more likely to take time off to travel in the U.S.

## **Messaging**

The key messaging was data-driven. The U.S. Travel Association commissioned an average of eight research studies a year from Oxford Economics to continuously find new messaging opportunities to leverage for the Travel Effect campaign. One of the key strengths of this campaign was that the messaging was compelling, relevant, and newsworthy and focused on individuals. The messaging highlighted the benefits that travel had for people's health, relationships, family life, productivity, and overall happiness. Because of its strong messages, Travel Effect was able to gain media coverage throughout the year in major news sources.

## **Tactics**

The execution of the campaign was composed of two key parts: media relations and social media. The campaign's media coverage has been exceptional in terms of outreach to a wide range of media sources with large exposure. Over the last two years, just about every major U.S. news source has had a piece featuring the Travel Effect campaign and its data. Travel Effect has been featured in articles in The New York Times, Huffington Post, The Washington Post, and most other major U.S. newspapers and news outlets. The U.S. Travel Association relied on developed media relationships to execute its media outreach aspect of its campaign.

The campaign had no spokesperson; however, the campaign manager did appear on news shows and was quoted in articles. There were no events or press conferences as the campaign was kept on social media and in the news. The

research findings were pitched to the media to be brought to the American public as news stories and published on the Travel Effect website.

**Evaluation**

Both the media relations and the social media components were separately assessed for the evaluation of the campaign. The U.S. Travel Association also was able to develop relevant content for social media that was likely to gain impressions and shares among social media users. For the social media execution, platform appropriate material was created that including infographics, videos, and short news stories. This material made sense for social media. The original campaign has morphed into another phase and thus the Travel Effect continues to aim to get Americans to travel more in the U.S. Overall, Mr. Bobo says that the campaign is successful and continues to be successful.

**Campaign Analysis & Recommendations**

**SWOT Analysis of the U.S. Travel Association (with regard to Travel Effect)**

<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Opportunities</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has a substantial budget of millions of dollars to delegate to Travel Effects</li> <li>• Conducts thorough and frequent research studies</li> <li>• Has strong social media content</li> <li>• Has strong media relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Travel is frequently a newsworthy topic</li> <li>• Travel is a commonly talked about subject</li> <li>• Travel is a desirable activity</li> <li>• There are many other industries that are potential partners</li> </ul>
<b>Weaknesses</b>	<b>Threats</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Viewed as a lobbying organization</li> <li>• Is not well recognized association</li> <li>• Vulnerable to economic shifts</li> <li>• Can appear self-interested</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• American work cultural</li> <li>• American financial fears</li> <li>• Economic conditions could weaken</li> <li>• Increases in gasoline, air travel, and other travel costs</li> <li>• Security threats that scare travelers</li> </ul>

**Overall Campaign Assessment**

Setting out to change the work and travel behavior of Americans is no easy task. This campaign aims to change Americans' attitudes of taking time off to travel by using research-backed messaging that informs Americans how travel can improve their lives. In terms of assessing the campaign's success, evaluation is tricky as with any behavioral

change campaign. This campaign's national focus on a behavior – taking time off to travel – that is complex and is influenced by a number of variables makes this campaign all the more difficult to evaluate.

Using the research, the Travel Effect campaign produced original content for social media and crafted stories for the media. Research is central to the campaign's message development and has proven to be useful in developing interesting content and narrative messages. The research is also very thorough and useful for both developing messages as well as identifying opportunities for segmenting the audience. Since much of the research conducted is survey research, the campaign can regularly gain insights into its audience.

The social media campaign was successful on Twitter but unsuccessful on its other activated platforms of Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. The content posted to Twitter is regularly occurring and is pertinent to what is happening online and in the news. The biggest failing of Travel Effect's Twitter presence is its tendency to be redundant and feature content that is merely tangent to the campaign's message. The campaign's Twitter page has over 3,000 followers and almost 1,300 tweets. The campaign's Instagram page has just over 100 followers and just under 50 posts. Many of the posts in the Travel Effect Instagram account do not relate to the campaign's message.

The Travel Effect has no official Facebook page, but its presence is felt on the U.S. Travel Association's page as its cover photo has the Travel Effect's logo. The U.S. Travel Association's page has almost 6,000 likes, but only a few dozen visits and few posts relate to the campaign. The U.S. Travel Association's YouTube channel features many campaign videos that are wide ranging in message and quality. Some of the videos, while conceptually smart and strategic, fail to execute professional quality productions. Almost all of the videos have the number of views within the hundreds or thousands. Twitter was the only social media platform that Travel Effect continued to use throughout the campaign and continues to use today. The campaign's relatively strong media outreach and decent Twitter engagement makes the campaign impactful. If success is best measured by achieving the main objective, then this campaign's success is near impossible to assess.

## **Campaign Objectives**

As a trade association, the primary objective of the U.S. Travel Association is to increase travel within the United States. With the Travel Effect campaign, the main objective is the same; however, its strategy is a two-step process. First, Travel Effect must convince American workers to use their paid time off and then it must convince Americans to use their time off to travel. The U.S. Trade Association wants to increase travel within the U.S. to drive the hospitality, travel, and tourism industries. The campaign is meant to address a leading obstacle that Americans face in determining if they should go on vacation or take a trip. Travel Effect aims to change attitudes towards America's "work martyr" culture.

## **Strategies**

The Travel Effect's overarching strategy relies largely on well targeted, relevant messaging. The main strategy for Travel Effect was to approach messaging for encouraging travel by providing statistical support for the benefits that traveling gives to average Americans. The two main strategies that the campaign leverages is a media outreach program and a social media campaign. With the media outreach component, Travel Effects relied on commissioned research to create stories that would be relevant and picked up by news outlets. Travel Effect aimed to earn as many placements in as many news outlets as possible.

The social media component of the campaign was also well selected as an appropriate key strategy. Travel is a commonly discussed topic among friends, family, and colleagues and social media brings these conversations to the online environment. Since travel is a topic that prompts the sharing of stories and offering of recommendations, providing people a space to learn about and discuss travel online with others is central to the success of the campaign. The social media component is crucial to generating buzz and getting people to share Travel Effect's statistics and messages.

## **Tactics**

For the media outreach component, national and regional news outlets were largely approached for featuring stories; however, local news outlets and travel

organizations also picked up Travel Effect stories. Since the stories had national appeal, targeting the top tier national news outlets was a strong strategic approach. More importantly, identifying research findings that could translate into interesting and relevant news stories was the greatest execution on the campaign's media outreach element. By being selective in identifying strong stories to pitch to the media, Travel Effects was able to gain stories in many outlets and different points throughout the year.

For the social media component, sharable content was created that contained the core messages of the campaign with statistical support. The development of infographics played a central role in the social media component. Infographics that also functioned as web advertisements were designed to be sharable on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and, most prominently, Twitter. Additional sharable content was created including online videos, fact sheets, and simple posts that often played off of relevant news events and trends. A small video contest was also promoted on Twitter and social media pages directed users to [traveleffect.com](http://traveleffect.com).

## **Campaign Strengths**

### **Research**

The campaign was developed on the assumption that American workers were not taking all of their pay time off. The U.S. Travel Association then commissioned research to be conducted by Oxford Economics to support this assumption. The research supported this critical assumption and insights about how travel effects people were found. The U.S. Travel Association commissions research to be conducted for the uses of the Travel Effect campaign throughout the year. Approximately, the Travel Effect produces eight research studies a year. The findings of these studies are used in the strategy development and messaging focus of campaign materials. These research study reports are available to the public on Travel Effect's website.

### **Segmenting the Target Audience & Making Messages Relevant**

While the stated target audience is all Americans, there is evident segmenting among the various pieces of content produced. The Travel Effect campaign creates content that is meant to resonate with particular types of Americans. Travel Effect

targets couples with messages of how travel can improve their relationships. These couple-focused content pieces are executed near Valentine's Day to make the information relevant to the audience. Similarly, Travel Effect created content targeting families about the value of taking family vacations that coincided with the times families start to plan summer trips. This audience segmenting in combination with delivering relevant messages at the right times exemplifies strong opportunity identification.

### **Individual Impact Focus**

For the most part, the central focus of the messaging is how traveling can benefit people's lives. The research conducted as part of the campaign discovered that employees taking time off makes them more productive and, thus, more valuable. The campaign leveraged its research strategically and was able to keep the message primarily focused on how travel benefited individuals. With the exception of some economy and business benefiting messaging focuses, the messaging almost always appealed to the self-interest of individuals. Whether the message was how travel could lower stress, improve romance, better the family, heighten productivity, or simply increase happiness, the message was about how travel will help the consumer.

### **Campaign Improvement Areas**

#### **Establishing Measurable Objectives**

This particular critique should be taken lightly as it is quite possible that benchmarks are set to evaluate the results the campaign renders. Since the purpose is to increase travel, there must be a way to validate the campaign's impact. While the true impact of the campaign on increasing travel is not possible to precisely assess, measures can be taken that can allow insights to the campaign's reach and influence. Survey research can be conducted to understand the public's awareness, favorability, and intent to travel with regards to the campaign. If these results are favorable for the U.S. Travel Association, some of the findings could be published on the Travel Effect website to display its effectiveness.

#### **Avoiding Message Redundancy**



While message consistency is important for any campaign to drive home the main goal of the campaign, some variations of the message must be developed for campaigns that span multiple years to remain impactful. For instance, major brands such as McDonalds change its slogan to reenergize and refocus its purpose.

The Travel Effect campaign suffers from message redundancy as much of its content pushes the same message over and over again. This issue is most prevalent with the campaign's social media content. On Twitter, Travel Effect posts the most simplistic messages of take time off. While Twitter and other social media platforms provide limited space to convey complex messages, Travel Effect content should also aim to include the "whys" or the rational for why people should take time off.

### **Don't Lose Focus**

Since the objective of the campaign is to increase travel within the US, the promotional videos should exclude travel to other countries. Several of the promotional videos feature B-roll clips that take place outside the U.S. While these clips are consistent with the theme of enriching travel, it counters the central objective of increasing travel within the U.S. The inclusion of the international clips can be best diagnosed as a lost sense of the campaign's overall purpose. The campaign also has Tweets that encourage people to take time off but not to take time off to travel. This is another way in which losing sight of the main objective can translate into less impactful messaging.

With a campaign that includes dozens of collateral materials, it's easy for the overarching campaign objective to get lost during the production of individual pieces of the campaign. However, every piece created for the campaign, whether it's a promotional video or an infographic must be consistent with the campaign's overall objectives.

### **Differentiating Between Types of Travel**

The campaign has done an excellent job at identifying opportunities such as Valentine's Day and summer breaks to encourage travel; however, the campaign also has instances in which opportunities for creating content has been misidentified. For instance, during the month of December the campaign creates social media content

that encourages taking time off for holiday travel. Holiday travel is not the same as traveling for pleasure. Families going to visit relatives for the holidays do not fuel the economy the same way tourism travel brings in dollars.

Messaging that leverages conventional habits of creating New Year's resolutions may be a better focus than encouraging holiday travel. Prompting people to make New Year's resolutions to travel in the New Year or to use up the rest of their vacation days by going on a trip would relate to the overall objective of increasing travel throughout the U.S better than encouraging holiday travel.

### **Media Generation Evaluation**

The media outreach element of the campaign is successful in terms of reach and placements in well circulated news publications and highly viewed news broadcasts. The contents of the news stories that Travel Effect claims to have placement in is, on the other hand, sometimes questionable. The Huffington Post, Washington Post, Gawker, The New York Times, CBS News, Bloomberg, The New Republic, The New Yorker, and Forbes are just some of the media entities that carried the Travel Effects story.

While Travel Effect reports an impressive list of media sources picking up its message, not all of these news stories are explicitly about travel, encourage travel, or even mention Travel Effect or the U.S. Trade Association. For instance, Travel Effect lists a placement in The New Yorker as an example of its campaign making news headlines. However, this story is about a Super Bowl ad for Cadillac which merely features a statistic about Americans not taking vacation days. The story has no mention of Travel Effect or the U.S. Trade Association. The sentence about vacation days appears later in the article and does not actually encourage readers to take days off.

There are several other media pieces featured on the Travel Effect website that actually have no mentions of the campaign or the U.S. Travel Association. This is reasonable as long as the U.S. Travel Association is not including these articles in its evaluation of the media reach and the campaign's overall success. In some cases, articles that promote national travel but have no mention of the U.S. Travel Association can benefit the Travel Effect campaign as these pieces could appear less self-promoting as it might if the message was attached to the U.S. Travel Association.

While several of the stories had minimal mentions of the campaign and the U.S. Travel Association, many of the well placed pieces featured strong pro-travel messaging with ample statistical support derived from the Travel Effect research. Stories featured in the Washington Post and CBS News both featured messaging that was consistent with the Travel Effect campaign.

## **Campaign Recommendations**

### **Pledge Initiative**

There are a few tactics that haven't proven successful with campaigns that aim to change behaviors that are culturally embedded and difficult to alter. Asking people to take a pledge to change a behavior or practice a new one is a tactic that addresses the cultural commonality of a behavior and works to affirm a new behavior as socially acceptable and desirable. For example, AT&T's It Can Wait campaign asked people to take the pledge to not text while driving. Through the growing number of people who took the pledge and the fame and following of some of the pledge-takers, cultural attitudes towards texting while driving began to shift. The shifts in cultural attitudes caused texting and driving to be viewed as an irresponsible and foolish action.

This tactic can be applied to the Travel Effect campaign by prompting Americans to take the pledge to take time off and travel. The pledge system can help the idea of taking time off to travel become a more culturally accepted and commended notion. Additionally, it allows for people to make a commitment to themselves to travel. The "Take Time Off and Travel" pledge would also increase campaign awareness, provide another metric for accessing success, and increase word of mouth communication about the benefits of taking time off to travel.

### **Get Local**

The objective of "increasing travel within the United States" is vague and difficult to measure. Aiming to increase tourism on the national level works to create a national conversation about travelling. However, the campaign could benefit by developing local initiatives that would target selected markets to encourage them to travel. Markets that have made impressive gains in the recovery from the recession could be

excellent targets for a local travel initiative. The U.S. Travel Association could target select markets with area-specific messaging that aims to educate reluctant travelers as well as sponsoring travel-related events and partnering with local initiatives to increase travel.

### **Go Corporate**

The U.S. has a long history of a profound cultural affinity for hard work and dedication. This cultural inclination in combined with difficult economic conditions has created a dangerous mixture that makes changing work and travel behavior a matter of changing perceptions and culture before changing behavior. Over the last several years, workers throughout the country have faced rounds of layoffs and competitive work environments. Difficult times create fear that lasts even after economic conditions start to improve. For millions of Americans, this fear still exists and it's causing them to maintain tight finances and an unrelaxed work ethic.

To understand the rationale for this recommendation, consider the lobbying for healthier school lunches. The School Nutrition Association targeted the governing parties that determined which foods landed in school cafeterias instead of targeting school children. In the case of the U.S. Travel Association, targeting the American public with pro-travel messages is sort of like telling school children to buy milk instead of soda at lunchtime. When it comes to a reluctant audience (school children or American workers) and a profound attitudinal and behavioral change, campaign dollars go further when targeting the audience with the most power. In the case of the U.S. Travel Association, this audience is American companies and corporations.

The U.S. Travel Association could target American companies and corporations and educated them on the benefits of encouraging their employees to take time off and travel. Since the American work culture is one of the biggest barriers to taking time off to travel, working with the companies and corporations that enable the work culture can help the U.S. Travel Association target the heart of Americans relationship problem with work and pleasure.

### **Create Cross-Industry Partnerships**

Managing Director of Travel Effect, Gary Oster, says “when people start realizing the importance of taking their earned time off, the travel industry will be a natural beneficiary” and that “there will be a lot of winners in American commerce when Americans use those earned days off.” With this insight, the U.S. Travel Association should consider approaching other trade association that would benefit from Americans taking more time off and ask them to consider using the “take time off” messaging within their own initiatives.

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