

On My Mind
10/6/06

The Saipan Chamber did it again - put on a great program - both timely and informative - this time so popular that the host site was left scrambling to accommodate all the attendees. The Chamber's October general membership meeting held earlier this week featured a presentation on the Marianas Visitors Authority and the hosting of numerous local junior and senior high school students in observance of Student Career Exploration Day. The Saipan World Resort had been told to expect about 80 people, but whether to hear about MVA or just to escort their guests, more than 200 people actually attended, filling the large meeting room to capacity.

World Resort staff unflappably brought in more chairs and tables, more trays of food, more desserts, more staff to pour iced tea. Said Carlos Ballesteros, Steward Manager, "I could see by the lines as people came in that there were going to be a lot more than 80, so we alerted the kitchen to start preparing more food." Chimed in Ray Austin, Beverage Manager, "We had to pull in people from other service points, but we managed." Ballesteros says it takes about 30 minutes to "catch up" under such circumstances. It was a well-orchestrated and truly impressive performance!

The presentation on the Marianas Visitors Authority, by Jerry Tan, Chair of the MVA Board of Directors and Michael Merner, Managing Director of MVA Japan, was also well orchestrated - with a power point presentation that was clear, comprehensible, and informative. On the other hand, impressive it was not.

Tan spoke at some length about airline issues, one of the four "cornerstones" on which, he said, MVA plans to build recovery of the tourism industry. He particularly noted the lack of service by airlines, explaining that the high cost of fuel, discounted package fares, limited cargo revenue, and unattractive night flights, among other things, have all contributed to the decrease in service by the airlines. Yet Tan insisted that the demand is there - that demand is not the problem. Yet If demand is not a problem, one wonders why MVA feels it needs so much more money for trips to Japan trying to solicit more tourists.

Given much shorter shrift were the remaining three cornerstones, presented by Merner: the need to develop a better image as an "up-market" destination, the need for more funding in order to compete with other area destinations, and the need for what was called "destination enhancement," in that order.

The sequence simply does not seem logical to me. In order to compete, in order to offer a better image, in order to prompt more airlines to serve the CNMI, it would seem to me the first priority would be to enhance the destination - make the CNMI more attractive, more desirable as a place to visit. Yet not only was this the last of the four mentioned, but the areas identified as needing destination enhancement (DE) focussed on the commercial side of things: greater shopping opportunities, more restaurants, fancier hotels, a better departure experience, better on-island transportation, more attractions, and improved immigration/customs clearance.

Plans for developing a better image as an up-market destination (the second cornerstone) - also described as developing a brand image, a higher value destination - basically focussed on invoking the services of spin doctors to use different language, create a different vision to be reflected in ads, in press releases, in newspapers, magazines, television, tourist brochures, and the

like. Mention was also made of the need to upgrade hotel facilities and the like. Though a need to present a "distinct identity" was mentioned, little attention was given to exactly what that identity would look like.

In terms of the need for more funding, Merner used graphs to compare the amount of money dedicated to visitor promotion in Australia, Hawaii, Okinawa and the CNMI. To no ones' surprise, the amount shown for the CNMI was by far the lowest. It seems the height of folly, however, to suppose that the CNMI could ever equal any of the other three in terms of total dollars expended. Far more meaningful, it seems to me, would have been figures comparing per capita expenditures.

Nor can the CNMI, realistically, expect to compete with the other three in terms of shopping experiences. It seems irrational, out of balance, to propose that more high-class shoppes come to the CNMI for the sole purpose of attracting more tourists. We simply are not large enough - in terms of either land or human resources, much less in terms of infrastructure capability (think of the water supply, for example). Just how many tourists can the CNMI sustain? Why import goods for sale that provide no real benefit to the people who live here?

What would make sense, but was not mentioned - and is not mentioned in the 155-page "Strategic Initiatives for 2006-2010" issued by the Ad hoc Tourism Committee of the Strategic Economic Development Council, and, according to Tan, being used as the "bible" by the MVA - is to begin by concentrating on improving the CNMI's image.

The CNMI could become the "jewel" of the Pacific, a unique destination not because of its shopping or other commercial attractions, but because of its beauty and its cleanliness, its Commonwealth-wide ecotourism, its art, culture, history, its multi-ethnicity. Nature trails, pristine waters, organic farm products, environmentally-friendly hotels, transportation systems and facilities, indigenous handicrafts, cultural festivals, its "up close and personal" zoo, and responsible development of Chamorro, Carolinian, Spanish and Japanese historic sites, could all be marketed as unique to the CNMI, and form the basis of a new brand, a better image, to be marketed to prospective tourists. As just one example, Saipan has several sites relating to the period of the Japanese Mandate - yet to date, these have all been ignored in favor of developing only the war-related sites. Might not more Japanese tourists be interested in that aspect of the history of their country in the CNMI than in its war history?

MVA may be relying on exit surveys to formulate its plans, but if tourists don't know what else of interest may or could be available on island, how can they ask for it? MVA might better focus on working with on-island agencies, the community, to increase and improve island attractions - and on developing rainy day activities. Take the Northern Islands, for example. Not mentioned at all, anywhere. Yet they offer great potential for true eco-tourism - which the MVA obviously does not understand, citing as eco-tourism in its "bible" only a list of natural attractions. Moreover, something is wrong when tourists say they want greater restaurant experiences, even though Saipan already has a wonderful variety of good restaurants - most of whom, in fact, suffer from a lack of patronage.....

Even the Strategic Initiatives publication is problematic, unfocussed. It highlights 11 "strategic statements" - without any evident prioritization, nor even a list of criteria as to what is being aimed for - other than the goal of 1,000,000 tourists by 2010. Tellingly, the report states that "it takes just 95 tourists to employ one government worker." That would mean that the one .. million tourists would support 10,526 government workers. Is that what the MVA is striving

for?

Short takes:

The *Tribune* either knows something no one else does, or its headline in last Sunday's paper was most misleading. The headline read, "Investor green card for sale." But the article itself says only that it is being *considered* by the governor and his "think tank." Sounds to me like another of those "shoot-from-the-hip" ideas that keep getting thrown out by the administration. If the reaction is positive, maybe it will come to pass, and if it isn't, it will merely be another bullet that missed its mark, to continue the metaphor.

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Much as I disagree with actions taken - and inactions - on the part of the governor, it would be churlish indeed not to wish him a successful operation and a speedy recovery. The governor is in California undergoing surgery for lumbar spinal stenosis, which was to take place today.

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CUC is promising lower power bills by November. But what about the rolling power outages? Weren't they also supposed to end by November? Admittedly, it's easier to cope when one knows when the power will go out, but all the same, it's getting pretty tiresome. And so long as the island is on rolling power outages, you can bet no new investors are going to risk doing business here. In fact, it becomes clearer and clearer that without a stable infrastructure, the economy simply is not going to recover. Which makes getting the power situation under control a top priority, seems to me.

But the Request for Proposal for privatizing CUC apparently depends on passage of a law creating a public utilities commission. Both a Senate and a House bill have been drawn up. Earlier this week, the Senate and Senator Pete P. Reyes in particular struck a blow for failure by dumping the better bill (the Senate substitute) and passing the poorer House Bill, emasculating it in the process by eliminating reference to the existing Commonwealth Telecommunications Commission. All of which will result in a far more ineffective response to the RFP than would otherwise have been made - if indeed, there are any responses at all.

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Who is the "slow the meter" group/team? It had an ad in the paper a while back, advertising that for a mere \$3.00 it could slow down peoples' electric meters. Well, I sent in my \$3.00, and got back a four-page single-spaced list of suggestions as to what I could do to "slow down" my meter. The suggestions were mostly of the standard "energy efficiency" and "energy conservation" types. But there were also some good ideas that are less often mentioned, such as turning off fans when no one is in the room because fans don't cool air, they just move it around; or keeping blinds or drapes closed during the day to keep out the sun, using the microwave instead of electric range whenever possible, checking freezer and refrigerator gaskets to make sure they're tight.

The question is, why does this group think it has to remain anonymous?

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Movies this week: New, 1 R, added to the rest: 5 PG-13's, 2 PG's.