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Las Vegas Touts Its Affordability

Campaign Rounds Up Texans to Persuade Americans They Deserve a Break

By TAMARA AUDI

Desperate for visitors and fighting the perception that now isn't the time to splurge on roulette or glitzy stage shows, Las Vegas has a new marketing message, and some unusual messengers: 100 or so Texans from a tiny town outside of Waco.

In recent years, the gambling mecca attracted tourists with a campaign that portrayed it as the ideal place to indulge in extreme behavior, like conspicuous consumption. But its assurance that "What Happens Here Stays Here" lost its resonance as the recession sobered the nation's mood and brought thrift back into fashion.



Anthony Kurtz

Cranfills Gap, Texas, resident Georgia Gustafson, 81, sits on a Harley during her all-expenses-paid trip to Las Vegas to appear in its ad campaign.

By contrast, its new campaign, with the slogan "Vegas Bound," urges hard-working Americans to take a well-deserved break in Las Vegas, so they can return re-energized for the task of making sure their homes and businesses survive the tough

economy.

"We had to think how we should address our customers during this financial crisis when they're reluctant to make big financial commitments," says Rossi Ralenkotter, chief executive of the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority. "We're appealing to Americans saying, 'You're working hard. It's OK to take a break.' "

The campaign, which includes TV commercials, as well as minidocumentaries on online-video site YouTube, was created by Las Vegas-based R&R Partners. It features real people from Cranfills Gap, Texas, whose 358 residents refer to it simply as "The Gap."

More than 100 people from the town, including cowboys, bar owners and a mother with her three grown daughters, were taken on an all-expense-paid trip to Las Vegas for the filming of the ads. They show Cranfills Gap residents out on the town in high-end night clubs and spas, racing cars, riding Harleys and eating at upscale restaurants. A grinning 81-year-old woman from the town gives a thumbs-up after an indoor sky-diving session.

To emphasize that a Vegas vacation isn't just for the self-indulgent, many of the people featured in the campaign say they've been working too hard to have ever taken a vacation.

Las Vegas marketers say they researched more than 100 small towns, but settled on Cranfills Gap as the embodiment of working-class America -- their target audience. They hope to show that Las Vegas, while glamorous and luxurious, can be affordable.

For more than a year, the city has struggled with declines in visitors and revenues, prompting thousands of layoffs at casinos and hotels and the cancellation of major development projects. Room rates have plummeted as more luxury hotels have opened up during the recession.

Las Vegas has tweaked its marketing pitch several times in the past few months to try to quickly respond to changing economic conditions. But as the recession took hold and consumer confidence remained low, its marketers decided to try a completely new approach to redefining the city's image.

But supplanting Las Vegas's reputation as a posh resort destination frequented by the likes of Paris Hilton and Britney Spears will be a tricky job, marketing experts say. And getting people to spend money will be a challenge as consumers keep a tight rein on discretionary spending.

After years of marketing Vegas as a guilt-free adult playground, "it's hard to suddenly shift and see Vegas as prudent," says Jonah Berger, an assistant professor of marketing at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School. He said the new campaign tries to overcome that hurdle by continuing to market the city as a glamorous place, but offering a new justification for visiting. "They're not suggesting Vegas isn't glitzy, but that given the current economy, consumers deserve a break," he says.

Producing the campaign, which was launched Jan. 12, cost about \$2.5 million, says R&R Partners. Buying advertising will consume an estimated 70% of the LVCVA's first-quarter budget of \$12.6 million.

The campaign is having a big impact -- at least on Cranfills Gap. Owen Carlson, whose family owns the Horny Toad bar, says both his bar and the town have had more business since the ads came out. The family appeared on the Jan. 29 episode of "Jimmy Kimmel Live" to talk about their Vegas trip.

"People are coming from all over just to see our little bar," Mr. Carlson says. "It's been a big help for Cranfills Gap."

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