

AUSTRALIA'S FUTURE IN THE WILDERNESS

"The reality is Australia can drop its prices all it likes – but we will never compete on price with our Asian neighbours while their workers earn in a month what our workers earn in a day. We must offer quality experiences that appeal to tourists on the basis of their uniqueness and bragging rights – not their price."

Tony Charters convened the 2008 Tourism Futures conference recently (EDS: June) and was surrounded by an industry in the dumps.

With a record attendance of 450 delegates gathered at Crowne Plaza Royal Pines on the Gold Coast, the mood teetered on crisis talks with the lowest visitor number in three decades, record fuel prices and Qantas slashing its schedules.

Many in the audience were reeling, with delegates from Quicksilver tours on the Great Barrier Reef a key example – already carrying a \$250,000 monthly fuel bill news of flights being cut from Japan and interstate capitals tightened the screws.

"There are some major challenges facing the industry. The issue of fuel is monumental in itself. On top of that the industry really needs to face up to climate change and take some meaningful steps towards reducing carbon footprints. And the whole area of building visitor numbers and marketing is a colossal challenge – but there were some very inspiring guide ropes into the future," said Mr Charters.

Leading US technology and online travel expert, Philip Wolf, president and CEO of PhoCusWright addressed the conference over the three days, giving real insights into where the market is heading and how to capitalise on new technologies.

"Philip was able to shine a torch light into the future for us. The market in the USA is so much more sophisticated than in Australia at the moment, so it really did give us an a head-start on how to take the initiative and be prepared for the coming decade," said Mr Charters.

Australian operators and major government agencies shared their experiences and strategies, including the successful branding of Victoria and the city of Melbourne.

And while the city of Sydney is struggling, there is some promise in New South Wales.

“The overhaul of New South Wales Parks is one of the most exciting makeovers in the country. It has adopted a very progressive and entrepreneurial approach to the parks, developing some very interesting partnerships with industry and using the parks, which are a truly significant national asset, to mature our tourism product – particularly in the regions.

“Daniel Levine, a keynote speaker who is an international trend-spotter fully supported the focus on the environment and pointed out that beach holidays alone were never going to attract North Americans or Europeans in numbers. It is our unique wildlife that is a really valuable asset and we have failed to capitalise on it to date.”

Just like Southern Africa promotes its ‘big five’, Australia may soon go one better and be the home of the ‘big six’ and rather than shying away from the long haul travel it takes to get to here, Australia could soon be promoting the vast open spaces.

While Australia is considered one of the world’s most desirable destinations, the marketing pitch needs to target the baby boomers and backpackers who have plenty of time, as well as tapping into the 2 billion people to our north.

“It is not sustainable for New Zealand to be our major inbound source market,” said Mr Charters.

“We need to get on the front foot about our isolation, our unique wildlife and our natural assets. We can offer amazingly different experiences within the safety of a stable, clean, friendly environment.”

And if all of that wasn’t enough to grapple with – the prospect of marketing via social networks such as Facebook and Twitter is no longer an obscurity to be ignored.

"We have a whole new form of marketing developing – you could call it 'word of mouse'," said Mr Charters.

"Social networks and consumer generated reviews are like word-of- mouth on steroids and with more people around the world using the internet than watching television it is a potentially our best promotion tool ever."

For a full review of the conference a CD Rom of conference proceedings and the communiqué can be purchased via www.tourismfutures.com.au

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Michelle Farquhar
Mbl: 0432 334 994
michelle@tonycharters.com