

Philippine tourism: Still making the same mistakes

By J. Manuel González (The Philippine Star) – June 1, 2023 – 12:00am



(First of three parts)

The recent dust-up over Philippine advertising on London buses illustrates the perils of hoping Advertising can cure our country's low international image. Secretary Frasco was not the one at fault, but bravely took the blame. The ad will soon be forgotten but the root causes are still the same, and these roots can in fairness be traced back to many of Frasco's predecessors:

- Belief in promos and advertising.
- Reliance on bureaucrats with no relevant international experience and, for that matter, no common sense.

• Wrong choice of constituency.

Do you sell "Fun" with needles? Our exigrants (to coin a stronger word than "emigrant") are not good advertisements for the Philippines. They left because of poverty, crime, oppression, lack of opportunity. And the idea of deliberately associating us with Covid is a non-starter, bordering on madness. Look closely at the ad on the bus – the totally-black palette, half-smirk and syringe give it a sinister, chilling vibe, reminding us of horror movies.

Wasted bullets. Intelligent marketing strategists coldly assess strengths and weaknesses vis-a-vis competitors, put themselves into the minds of the target and the collateral audience and anticipate UNINTENDED messages like "What emotion do you associate with syringes?" No one in our government has ever understood simple communication concepts. Whoever approved that ad was misled by bureaucrats, maybe the same ones who told Secretary Frasco to bring native sewing looms to the Berlin Travel Fair, just to remind everyone we are a Third World country.

Price-cuts are not the answer. A past tourism secretary decreed that hotels should slash prices, so "tourists will flock here." They didn't. Discounts clear expired stock in supermarkets, but are the wrong "promo" for the major part of the tourism market.

Price helps define the approximate market you're in – Kias or Audis? Wrong pricing attracts the wrong visitors and pegs the country's perceived quality (based on price) at the wrong level.

Wrong battlefield. 25 years ago the then-tourism-secretary was adamant that we should compete with Spain and France for cultural tourists. In her dreams. Culture is the wrong battlefield to fight on, just as basketball is the wrong battlefield for us in sports. As a "cultural destination" we are simply not a contender. Think Intramuros is world-class? Ever heard of Angkor Wat? K-Pop? Think anyone will travel here in the hope of watching nose flute concerts? The very thought is a turn-off. And so on. Blame the Spanish and the Americans if you like, but deluded insular hubris will not make us a cultural-tourism powerhouse.

The DOT is currently on a misguided mission to re-brand the Philippines culturally. DOT bureaucrats are ordering hotels to play OPM in lobbies, adopt a standard "invented-Filipino" bow and re-work their architecture and decor to "look Filipino." To give their scheme credibility, bureaucrats with personal delusions are hiring FOREIGN consultants (who consult because they can't actually run a successful hotel).

The objective is to dictate to everyone how to do business. Evidently they think the Philippines is a Communist country, and they are the Politburo.

Access, not promos. The growth of tourism during 2000-2010 was almost entirely due to the Korean market. The key was opening air routes to competition – letting the free market work. I have no hesitation in reminding that it was my hotel, Plantation Bay Resort & Spa, and our general manager, Efren Belarmino, that were most responsible for this achievement. The Department of Tourism and practically all the hotels in the country tried to silence us because they feared offending PAL. We at Plantation Bay had to fight for Open Skies practically alone.

I published articles and gave speeches, even wrote two guest main editorials in the Asian Wall Street Journal. Efren Belarmino patiently worked behind the scenes and finally convinced PAL to try some Seoul-Cebu routes. He found a Korean general sales agent who promoted us and the country. We identified a target niche where Plantation Bay's unique ambience gave us a competitive advantage: honeymooners. (Now it's multi-generation families, some including those same honeymooners, with grandparents and Made-in-Plantation-Bay children.) PAL's trial routes were a success. Other airlines jumped in and helped expand the pie. Result? PAL is much better off than it was before, and so is the country – without culture, discounts or any help from the head office of the Department of Tourism. (To be fair, most regional directors have been very effective, notably Dawnie Roa.)

Quick fixes. Our country's international image at this time makes any ad campaign a waste of money. If our President is serious about tourism, he should start with these quick fixes:

- Cancel the online pre-registration for arrival in the Philippines. Hardly any other country in the world has these anymore, and nobody checks the answers anyway. It's just a few minutes, so who cares? Tourists care. Every obstacle swings thousands to other destinations.
- Eliminate the long waits and corruption at Immigration and Customs, which are some bureaucrats' idea of "It's More Fun to Piss Off Tourists Immediately Upon Arrival." There will be many excuses by the agencies concerned. The President just needs to say "BS."
- Protect our tourism capital – the tourism businesses and those who work in tourism. Issue a presidential decree making it a mandatory-prison offense to swindle tourists or tourist businesses, covering diverse acts as planting bullets, over-charging passengers, local and national officials "shaking down" hotels for bribes, failing to schedule enough agents to clear arrivals within 15 minutes of touchdown; publishing false reviews.

Thailand, as usual, is ahead of us – there it is a crime to post a false review, thus protecting their restaurants and hotels from liars.

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