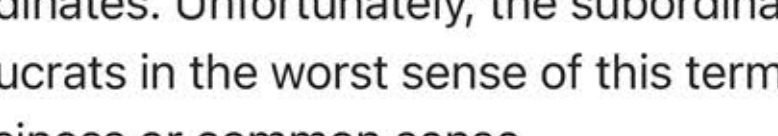


Philippine tourism: Still making the same mistakes

By J. Manuel González (The Philippine Star) – June 3, 2023 - 12:00am



Most tourism secretaries are new to the industry and do the natural thing: rely on their subordinates. Unfortunately, the subordinates are bureaucrats in the worst sense of this term, with no business or common sense.

Is it really more fun? Also subscribing to the promo theory, PNoy made an advertising executive his tourism secretary. Without wishing to demean the late PNoy or his secretary, I contend the secretary made (and PNoy allowed) two serious blunders, misled by their bureaucrats.

First was It’s More Fun. Many people like this slogan, but it is a different version of Choosing the Wrong Battlefield. Of course it’s fun in the Philippines. Just like it’s fun in Phuket, Las Vegas and Budapest. Claiming we’re “more fun” is like a car saying it provides “more transportation” – close to meaningless.

People travel for a complex and ever-changing smorgasbord of conscious reasons – family, duty, business, romance, adventure, escape from monotony, escape from urban stress, sport, prestige – while also motivated by subconscious emotional buttons like guilt, envy, fear, desire for status or recognition, self-image, self-validation and self-reward. It’s More Fun fails to convincingly distinguish us from any other country, and hits no emotional buttons that will prompt a Buy decision.

The blind leading the blind. Our country has wasted many millions of dollars on useless and even counter-productive tourism advertising. The latest one is the UK fiasco, but there were others before.

A DOT ad in Norway urged Norwegians to come for our scenery. We’re talking about Norway, with some of the most spectacular scenery on earth, a tiny population of 5 million WHITES, 22 hours away by plane. Likelihood of the ad, which probably cost mucho dinero, attracting any Norwegians? Zip.

Another advertisement showed a young WHITE man backpacking. An elderly rural woman makes him feel wanted by calling him “Anak.” Young man’s eyes mist up. Who is the target audience of this ad? A lone-wolf-type WHITE backpacker, with little money, in search of a mother figure. Just what our tourism industry needed.

My favorite example was the television advertisement showing how a blind WHITE man could enjoy the Philippines with his other four senses. The ad was creative, heart-warming and Politically Correct.

The ad was STUPID. Think hard, really hard: How many blind people watch television? How many sighted people want to identify with a blind person’s travel preferences?

Note the fixation with a WHITE audience. Keep reading.

Bureaucrats trying to justify their jobs impose stupid things on the rest of us.

PNoy’s tourism secretary was also responsible for the DOT’s compulsory star rating program. Undeterred by getting told by Congress in 2016 to drop it, DOT officials, some of whom were already fired years ago, continue to hoodwink each new secretary into resurrecting the Star Rating Program. The motive? So that DOT bureaucrats can enjoy power over hotels.

Because I publicly and loudly objected to their star rating program, the DOT made sure Plantation Bay has the very great distinction of being the only hotel in the entire country with 0 stars. Zero.

We don’t care, because no one believes the DOT anyway. But our 0-star rating is the proof that DOT does not have the brains or honesty to evaluate hotel quality. It also lacks the brains to know how to spend its promotion budget of \$120 million. And it lacks the brains to tell me how I should culture-brand my hotel. Why should a few petty bureaucrats with delusions of grandeur and the ear of the secretary or even perhaps the president have the power to tell 15 percent of the economy how to run our businesses?

No serious national government in the world has a compulsory national hotel rating system. (Vietnam has one, but it’s optional.) With the internet, it is not needed – pictures and guest comments speak better than stars. Anyway, star ratings are already available from booking.com, TripAdvisor, many others. Why does our DOT need to spend lots of money to add its opinion to this already well-served field?

Answer: “Because we’re the experts.” I once heard a DOT undersecretary tell a congressional hearing that, and the saddest part was that she really believed it. The context was that the collective opinions of the customers were irrelevant, and only the Department of Tourism was qualified to decide how many stars a hotel should have. Not booking.com, not TripAdvisor. Not the customers. Just the DOT. When God handed out tourism smarts, She gave them all to our very own Department of Tourism.

But when pressed, the DOT could not produce a single credential or achievement that would justify their calling themselves “experts.” Ever lived abroad? No. Ever designed or built a hotel? No. Ever ran a major hotel? No. Ever ran a business of any kind? No.

Closest claim to expertise? “We hired this WHITE man and paid him mucho moola. Look, he taught us how to set tables Western-style.” Yeah, right; you paid a white man hundreds of thousands of dollars for something free on the internet. And as for that particular WHITE man, see questions above.

Bureaucracy and whiteness. Lacking any international exposure (other than as tagabitbit on official trips), bureaucrats default to a pathetic case of Colonial Mentality. A previous iteration of DOT star criteria had comical definitions like “to be 5-star you must have designer lamps, designer furniture...” When asked what “designer” meant, the DOT said “if a designer designed it,” as if the congresswoman asking the question was rather “Duh” for needing to ask.

The DOT’s fallback definition of high-class is “what a WHITE man sold/designed/owns/manages.” A certain resort lacked ALL the DOT’s written criteria, but because it was owned by a Frenchman, had no restaurant and charged \$800, the DOT had no hesitation in giving it five stars.

The DOT’s new Philippine obsession is just another face of Colonial Mentality, combined with Crab Mentality. To encapsulate how this is shaping up: “With WHITES managing them, international hotel brands must be good, so let them do what they want. But as for Filipino hotels, we know they aren’t good enough to compete along any international standard, so we will force all of them to conform to our (DOT’s) idea of Filipino-hood, so that we are all in the same boat.” Would this make sense for ice cream? Cars? Hospitals? Sculptors? Urban planners? Fast food? The idea is STUPID.

This is called Centralized Economic Planning, and it has consistently been proven wrong over the past hundred years. Mao’s Great Leap Forward (“We will industrialize Chinese-style, in small villages”) set China back 20 years, but was less stupid than what the DOT is currently planning to do.

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