

# ST. JOHN SOURCE

Published on *St. John Source* (<http://stjohnsource.com>)

## V.I. Tourism Looking to Deliver on Promises Made to Visitors

[1] While it has already rolled out some of its initiatives for 2010, the V.I. Department of Tourism detailed its plan to keep the islands at the forefront of vacationers' minds during a media conference held Thursday at Yacht Haven Grande.

During the conference, three key objectives emerged: accurately targeting visitor markets, delivering on the promise that is made to every visitor who chooses the territory as their destination, and doing what it takes to keep visitors coming back.

"It is less expensive to get a visitor to return," Tourism Commissioner Beverly Nicholson-Doty said.

According to the commissioner, double-digit unemployment in markets that many of the territory's visitors call home, coupled with reduced disposable incomes, have impacted the territory's economy—not only in the number of visitor arrivals but also in the decline in amounts that they spend when they are here.

She added that 98 percent of visitors still come from the U.S. mainland, and national predictions are for slow growth, with expected further declines in hotel rates.

However, last year saw growth in the number of V.I. flight arrivals, which, she said, helped in "putting [the territory] ahead of the pack."

The department is operating with a 2010 budget of \$16 million, a 34 percent reduction from 2009. According to Nicholson-Doty, the department's goal is a 300 percent return on every marketing dollar spent. In addition, the commissioner stressed that her department is committed to using public funds responsibly.

Backing up Nicholson-Doty's stated commitment to metrics, the department's new website, with its welcoming new mocko jumbie logo, is receiving up to 60,000 visitors a month, the commissioner said. Interactive features include maps and a trip planner that lets users create a trip-planning list.

According to Nicholson-Doty, the "You Unscripted" and the "Port of Solace" marketing campaigns successfully targeted a number of markets: romance, yachting, the military, sailing, scuba, and swimming; while the "Intimate Treasure" campaign featured the territory's smaller hotels and inns.

Promoting the territory's natural beauty to visitors in key markets, like those served with direct or one-stop flights, is just one Tourism strategy. According to Sebastian Benjamin of JWT, which provides marketing services to the department, the territory is enhancing its efforts by offering discount promotions, along with hands-on cultural experiences, and a more personalized visitor experience.



Internationally, the department is focusing on Canada, Denmark and Italy. Visitors from these areas increased by double digits in 2009, according to Nicholson-Doty.

Tourism's 2010 marketing plan also includes leveraging social networking tools like Twitter and Facebook. "There is an explosion of people using Internet social networking channels," Brad Laney, of M Booth and Associates, said. Laney's company provides public relation services to the Tourism Department.

The department is using these tools to establish a following of influencers and develop a community of fans, Laney said. The department is also enlisting Virgin Islanders living abroad to help promote the destination. At a recent "direct-to-consumer" event in the Lenox Square Mall near Atlanta, Virgin Islanders living in Georgia joined mocko jumbies and tourism officials to show off V.I. cuisine and culture, turning out in droves to cook and socialize.

Getting visitors to keep coming back year after year is another area that is in the department's crosshairs. To maximize visitor experience, the department established a Customer Care Program, rolling out the greeters program in 2009 and expanding it in 2010 to offer traveler safety tips, as well as providing a 24-hour hot line to take care of problems before the visitor leaves the territory.

To get visitors to come back, they need to leave with a positive experience, which occurs after positive interactions, including complaint resolution. Nicholson-Doty's department engaged the services of the Freeman Group, a Dallas-based hospitality consulting firm, to conduct a "secret shopper" program, which has studied a number of Caribbean destinations. The program evaluated experiences from a number of analysts posing as vacationers. The nine pairs of analysts reviewed experiences in 10 sectors, with a total of 567 interactions recorded.

Using metrics from the analysis, the department took a close look at how the territory is performing against the "promise" that is made when a vacationer selects the territory as their destination. Freeman Group project manager Jesse Boles said the bottom-line measurement that guided the study is: "Are they going to get the experience that lured them here in the first place?"

Each interaction was evaluated in terms of 10 hospitality standards, which included eye contact, greeting with a smile and positive body language; employees speaking first and last to all customers; offering accurate information; using customer names; listening to complaints, and apologizing and agreeing on solutions with customers.

The results by sector were as follows:

Evaluated sectors (followed by their overall score) included taxis (85 percent), hotels (80), ferries (68), restaurants and bars (79), retail (86), activities (92), airline agents (75), greeters (90), general public (87) and airport security (74).

The overall score for the territory was an 82, just one point above the Caribbean average. To put the 82 score in perspective, Freeman Group officials say that 90 percent is the score required to keep visitors coming back and talking about their positive experience. Nicholson-Doty acknowledged that the exercise was risky and difficult, but that it spoke to the courage of the department.

"It's not easy to look at yourself and ask what are we not doing right," Nicholson-Doty said. "But we want to deliver on a promise."

With this first analysis, Nicholson-Doty said the department has established a benchmark, adding that she intends to take the findings to community groups like Rotary.

"Unless we know where the bar is, we don't know how far we need to raise it," Nicholson-Doty said.