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## It's hard to love those tourism slogans

By Jayne Clark, USA TODAY

When Pennsylvania tourism officials began shopping for a new state tourism slogan, they decided to bypass the professional ad copywriters and let The People decide.

Almost 22,000 entries later, a committee had whittled down the list to five possibilities to put to a popular vote. After the tally, the only hitch was that the winning catchphrase, "The State of Independence," was a tad too similar to the Saab ad tag line, "Welcome to the state of independence." Lawyers were consulted. The automaker granted trademark infringement immunity. And the nation's latest state slogan is now official.

Tourism slogans strive in a few short words to capture the heart and soul of a place and, not incidentally, drive tourist dollars there. These slogans are not to be confused with state mottos, which are so utterly devoid of marketing flair, they might as well be in Latin. (And most of them are.) Mississippi's motto, *Virtute et armis* (By virtue and arms), for example, is a lot less welcoming than its slogan, "Feels Like Coming Home."

Some slogans are simple commands: "Explore Minnesota." Some are grandiose: "North Dakota: Legendary." Some raise questions: "North Carolina: A Better Place to Be." (Better than where?)

But the essential question is: Do they work?

Not really. At least if a perennial exercise in Chekitan Dev's marketing and tourism classes at Cornell University is any indicator. The professor asks his students to match states with their slogans and invariably, their success is limited to an obvious few. (You can try your luck in the box above.)

"By and large, the slogans don't work," Dev says. After all, "distilling the essence of a destination into three to five words is a very daunting challenge."

Two reasons they fail: They don't truly differentiate a place. Plus, the destinations often can't back up their claims, he says.

Among notable exceptions is "Virginia is for Lovers," which turns 35 this year and is considered the granddaddy of state slogans. It was coined in 1969 (eight years before another old-timer, "I LOVE NY") and was the brainchild of a \$100-a-week copywriter who paired two irresistible concepts — travel and romance. It was the Summer of Love, and "the timing couldn't have been better," says Virginia tourism spokeswoman Martha Steger. The slogan "was full of nuance."

Over the years, marketers have tweaked the look of the words (replacing the "v" in Lovers with a heart, or scrawling it in lipstick, for example) but never the words themselves. In 2002, the state trademarked it.

"The equity we have in it is like England's crown jewels," Steger declares. "We can't even put a dollar value on it. All around the world when people hear Virginia, they say, 'Oh, yeah. It's for lovers.'"

South Carolina settled on "Smiling Faces. Beautiful Places" almost 20 years ago and hasn't budged since. South Dakota chimed in 13 years ago with "Great Faces. Great Places."

But the staying power of these slogans is the exception, not the rule. Indeed, many states swap catchphrases as often as they change administrations.

A new administration "comes in and they want a new look or a new philosophy, so the brand gets changed," says Patty Hubbard, an executive with the Travel Industry Association of America. "There's no longevity and no consistency."

In Massachusetts, tourism officials provoked a minor controversy two years ago when they sponsored a contest for a new advertising tag line, only to reject all 3,000 or so entries. Instead, they turned to their ad agency, which crafted the line, "Massachusetts. Make It Yours."


Tourism director Paul Sacco argues that the slogan fits into an overall advertising campaign. Besides, he says, the media dustup over the failed contest helped fix the new slogan in people's minds.

And back in Pennsylvania, The State of Independence is ready for its close-up with a new ad campaign this month.

Though if the truth be told, some of the committee's personal favorites, including "Got Amish?" and "Get Keystoned," didn't even make the final cut.

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