

CULTURAL PLANNING

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The Hawai`i Experience

A Native Hawaiian Perspective

By Peter Apo

While the following comments are specific to Hawai`i's visitor industry there are lessons for any place with a native population aspiring to grow tourism as a fundamental economic strategy.

Good cultural planning is always about *Leadership*, *Resources*, and *Commitment*. The place that Hawaiian culture holds in developing a company's product mix always presents a leadership challenge in Hawai`i. Even institutions who are well intentioned in their aspirations to heighten their Hawaiian "sense of place" have to pause when the reality that, like any other part of their operation, cultural planning requires committed leadership and resources in order to do it well.

In Hawai`i, most of the hotel and vacation ownership business models tend to approach creating a Hawaiian sense of place somewhat like a collection of potted plants. That is, to position a few Hawaiian exhibits around the property and perhaps incorporate a spattering of Hawaiian themes in the architecture and interior design of the buildings. While this model has to be respected as an honest effort to create a Hawaiian sense of place it is far from what is needed to actually claim the property as being a Hawaiian place.

The struggle of how much culture to include in your product mix seems to be how does one measure the return on investment. Standard operating models do not position Hawaiian culture in the budget as having equivalent operational standing when compared to primary budget categories such as sales and marketing, food and beverage, housekeeping, maintenance, banquets catering, and so forth.

Analyzing return on investment begins with two questions. First, to what level do you wish to rise in providing a memorable Hawaiian sense of place experience for your guests? Second, what value can the culture bring to your institution? No matter the level of your ambition here's some suggestions to get you started. Form a Cultural Advisory Team of managers and employees headed by a ranking member of the management team. Charge them to design a process by which to generate a cultural plan with a strong suggestion

that the plan include connecting the institution to the surrounding community. Provide resources for the planning process. Draft a plan. Establish an annual budget pegged to specific recommendations. Be consistent in the commitment to the plan and the quality and frequency of the cultural experiences you work into your product mix so that the plan can help drive your marketing. Find ways to "memorialize" the plan so that it takes on a life of its own that will survive the risks and perils of succeeding general managers and CEO's.

Your institution's cultural planning should be a dynamic process that never ends. It has to be more than a document that sits on a desk. It has to live and breathe. If the process is the vehicle then the engine is the people who have to drive it. The most important cultural planning asset you have is your workforce. It is in their hearts and minds that the real culture lives and thrives. They and their families are the living bridges between the institution and the cultural vibrancy of the surrounding community. Open the gates and let them in. The cultural depth they can bring to the effort is beyond purchase or the reach of any consultant to bring to the table. Your best possible investment and return will come from your employees. Empower them, trust them, provide them with the resources and opportunity and they will not disappoint you.