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## Vegas Turns to Reality Show Amid Recession

### Ditches 'What Happens' Campaign, Takes Townspeople on Vacation and Posts Video YouTube

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NEW YORK (AdAge.com) -- "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas" certainly seemed ready-made for reality TV. But it's a new campaign, "Take a break USA," that is getting star treatment.



As winners of the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority contest, the residents of the rural outpost of Cranfills Gap, Texas, were greeted in Vegas by 'The King.'

The popular branding campaign that promoted Sin City as a high-rolling destination where anything can happen has been shelved in favor of a more recession-proof strategy. The "Take a break USA" campaign was quickly developed last fall when it became clear the recession would take a dire toll on the travel industry.

"It is a direct response to how the economy is affecting people's use of discretionary dollars and the impact on travel budgets," said Terry Jicinsky, senior VP-marketing at the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority. "We're very focused on helping people eliminate the hesitation they have. ... Many of the messages received through the campaign are about impromptu travel."

#### **Dwindling revenue**

Mr. Jicinsky said he hopes the campaign, which is rolling out now and will run through at least March, will lead to short-term visits and stem [fast-dwindling revenue](#) in the city. It replaces R&R Partners' first effort to

address the economic uncertainty, a short-lived campaign called "Crazy times call for crazy fun," which launched in June. Preliminary figures for 2008 show a 4% decline in visitors and a 4.5% decline in hotel occupancy in the city. Both figures had been relatively flat before taking a nosedive in the fall, Mr. Jicinsky said.

With research showing that consumers believed Las Vegas was grinding to a halt -- media reports have highlighted the slowdown in new construction, and travel agents are offering steep discounts -- R&R Partners, the visitors authority's creative agency, set out to show consumers that simply isn't the case.

"Consumers wanted to know that Vegas was alive and vibrant and that they'd have the same experience as the last time they were there," said Rob Dondero, exec VP at R&R Partners.

To that end, the organization wanted a campaign that would be more retail-oriented, promoting local attractions and accommodations without focusing on discounted prices. "If you use price to market a destination and prices go up, the campaign you used previously works against you," Mr. Jicinsky said. "It's one of the things that people who market destinations are very conscious of."

### **Appealing to cash-strapped consumers**

The concept of documenting a citywide vacation for one small, quintessential American town of hardworking, deserving individuals was settled on as a way to appeal to cash-strapped, stressed-out consumers. Some 125 towns were considered, as the agency looked for a cross section of residents that would match the diverse array of visitors Las Vegas attracts. After narrowing down their choices, agency execs visited several towns and began identifying potential storylines.

Cranfills Gap, a rural outpost some 100 miles southwest of Dallas, was eventually chosen. Roughly one-third of the city's 350 residents took a five-day trip to Las Vegas in December, agreeing to let the agency chronicle their adventures reality-TV-style.

The residents were organized into groups such as the "Vegas Vixens" and "The Wild Bunch," and itineraries were created accordingly. But there were still some surprises along the way, Mr. Dondero said. One couple got engaged during dinner early on in the week, and an 81-year-old woman decided she simply had to go skydiving.

### **Online component**

An online component of the campaign features those itineraries so other visitors can recreate the experiences. Through a partnership with YouTube, about a dozen webisodes are being broadcast at [visitlasvegas.com](http://visitlasvegas.com) and [youtube.com/lasvegas](http://youtube.com/lasvegas).

The partnership with YouTube is a first for the visitors authority, Mr. Jicinsky said. He said he believes that social media and viral marketing are little-utilized channels that destination marketers should be looking at more closely. "Rather than just relying on 30-second television spots or print ads, [we all] really need to ramp up this social-media and viral-marketing aspect," he said.

Traditional media, including five 30-second spots, as well as newspaper and magazine ads, is still a part of the campaign, however. The campaign cost about \$2.5 million to produce and has nearly \$13 million in media buys behind it in the first quarter. Executives say that is on par with previous campaigns.