
Target Marketing

In Search of Rejuvenation

By Heather Fletcher

SEO helps Spain and Portugal navigate the sea of travel sites and steer American tourists to the Iberian Peninsula

Add a note...

Nearly 500 years ago, Don Juan Ponce de León traipsed across Florida in search of the elusive fountain of youth. But the Spanish explorer may have been misguided about leaving home, as now Americans searching the Internet for rejuvenating vacation spots voyage to his native Iberian Peninsula in droves.

This is partly due to U.S. tourism offices for Portugal and Spain employing Atlanta-based travel marketing firm Travel Spike to increase American tourism, mainly through search engine optimization. Travel Spike Founder and President Ryan Bifulco says the Web site he helped his clients create in late 2007, PortugalSpainBoth.com, traveled from zero page one rankings on major search engines to 506 page ones in nine months—all through organic search. This, Bifulco says, is an impressive achievement in a Web climate that brings up scads of search results for general keywords, including more than a billion for “travel” and millions for “vacation.”

“We increased our budgets, and we decided to maintain this program for the next [few] years because this promotion is valuable for both countries,” says Javier Piñanes, director of the Tourist Office of Spain. “In fact, in the last [few] years I can say that Spain and Portugal released very good figures in [attracting] American tourists to Europe. Spain and Portugal were [two] of the most visited countries in the last year, especially.”

Piñanes points to figures from Spain’s Ministry of Industry, Tourism and Commerce as well as the U.S. Department of Commerce. “According to our [2007] statistics ... we have increased the number of American tourists to Spain 22 percent,” he says. And, while he doesn’t expect double-digit increases for 2009 because of the U.S. recession, Piñanes still expects to see a slight rise in the number of American vacationers.

Old World Learns New World Ways

The old world is entering the tech age in force, and Piñanes says SEO efforts are usurping traditional marketing methods. While not completely abandoned, the old ways—of attending U.S. trade shows, creating tourism workshops, arranging tour packages with travel agents and hosting American travel journalists—are largely overshadowed by Internet efforts, especially SEO.

“The new strategies for us are very clear, no?” Piñanes asks. “We are trying to work very hard in [the] Internet because we consider that the individual tourist is [traveling to] Spain more than the tourists in groups or packages.”

This online effort joins a sea of changes for Iberian Peninsula tourism marketing. A few years ago, Spain’s tourism officials decided to shift the country’s image from a fun in the sun hot spot more toward that of a cultured, gastronomic pleasure jaunt. Around that time, those comfortably blending images began to coincide with those of Spain’s Romance language-sharing peninsula partner, Portugal.

So even before starting their Internet partnership, Piñanes says, both countries began discovering what they had in common and how they could work together to promote what they consider the best European vacation value around. In 2006, Spanish and Portuguese officials formalized that agreement.

Nuno Miguel Alves, North American tourism coordinator for the Portuguese Trade and Tourism Commission, says more than historic ties to the Romans, Celts and Moors unite the peninsula. American tourists regularly discover that Portuguese and Spanish people share a passion for life and an outgoing, friendly spirit toward visitors.

“We have lots of points of coincidence,” Piñanes says. “We are the doors of entrance [to] Europe for American tourists.”

Portugal? Spain? Both.

What marketers, globally, may notice is that Spain’s and Portugal’s amenities are nice, but they’ve always been there. What made 2007 different was simple: PortugalSpainBoth.com.

Enter Travel Spike and Bifulco’s vision to present those amenities to Americans in digestible, but sticky, bits. The challenge Spain and Portugal had to overcome in the U.S.—even before they could fine-tune their online strategy—was to first educate Americans about the countries that are just a seven-hour plane ride from New York.

So Spain, Portugal and Travel Spike tried the trick that teachers have been using worldwide for years: They made learning fun.

“We developed a new, interactive online game to showcase both destinations,” Bifulco says.

The game, “Exploria,” tested site visitors on their Iberian Peninsula knowledge and gave them a chance to win “the ultimate vacation experience to Portugal and Spain.” This gave Spain and Portugal a chance, too, to showcase their amenities by weaving mentions throughout the site in a way that would later make them searchable keywords. For instance, Exploria asks, “Which town in Portugal produces Port wine?” (Hint: Wine-making Douro Valley includes a city named Porto.)

Travel Spike continued to route potential visitors to the site through many channels, including a three-month-long “Portugal? Spain? Both.” advertisement in *Condé Nast Traveler* that simultaneously debuted with the site.

Online, players registered to participate in the virtual peninsula journey that lasted from Nov. 1, 2007 to April 30, 2008 and led Web visitors from PortugalSpainBoth.com to both countries’ official tourism Web sites, VisitPortugal.com and Spain.info, to find the right answers to the Exploria questions that changed weekly. There, they could book their vacations. Or, they could reroute themselves from PortugalSpainBoth.com to third-party travel agent sites via a site button titled “Travel Deals.”

After the challenge ended, visitors to PortugalSpainBoth.com’s Exploria page could opt in to receive e-mail notifications about future sweepstakes and promotional offers. (Potential tourists also could sign up to hear about Iberian Peninsula happenings directly on the homepage.)

At the same time, regularly updated on-site blogs detailed what tourists might see when they, for instance, traveled to Spain for New Year’s. Besides celebrating with street parties and fireworks, the “Spanish ‘good luck’ tradition on New Year’s is to eat a grape every time the clock strikes during midnight,” one blog notes.

So all these efforts, which were directly related to the site, increased organic search results. Then the reach extended.

“You can’t just focus on your own Web site and how it shows up in Google anymore,” Bifulco says. “You really have to make sure you’re keeping up with the times. In the travel industry, sometimes we call that travel 2.0.”

To that end, Travel Spike optimized videos, photographs, text, the blog and the e-newsletter for search. The company also monitored audio, video, blogging and podcasting search engines, in addition to the major players like Yahoo and Google. The Atlanta company worked on digital public relations efforts and getting third-party links to the site, for instance, via travel blogs. “So we do focus on words like ‘Spanish tour operators’ or ‘Iberian Peninsula travel deals’ to attract qualified users to our deals page,” Bifulco says.

Common sense indicates that optimizing for generic words, such as “travel,” would not benefit PortugalSpainBoth.com. Meanwhile, more specific keywords are rather easy to test in real time, as Internet feedback is instantaneous, he says.

As of press time, Bifulco reports PortugalSpainBoth.com has spurred more than 11,000 “social media marketing hits.” Having started with zero hits, he says this is an impressive number and includes mentions of Spain and Portugal on YouTube, Facebook, MySpace and blogs.

“Because the search engines are changing what they’re doing all the time and also the competition is changing what they’re doing all the time, the one thing about any search engine project is that it’s dynamic, and it’s kind of a living, breathing

thing,” he explains. “It’s not set in stone, so you’re really never done. I mean, you can always tweak things and change things and add things and subtract things and try to find that magical mix.”

SEO From the Outside In

Even American director Woody Allen can be an SEO boon. Allen’s 2008 film, “Vicky Cristina Barcelona,” displays the Spanish city in a way that the 1992 Olympic Games never did. Speaking of Spanish sports prowess, Americans began to take notice because five Spanish players currently play in the NBA, and the Spanish National Team won a silver medal in the 2008 Olympics.

For Portugal, fado singer Amália Rodrigues is making even the non-Portuguese drift into “saudade,” which Alves characterizes as: “That romantic and uniquely Portuguese longing to return to a time that exists in our cultural memory and not at all in time ... a longing to be and exist in a better place, and to revive a past that perhaps never existed at all.”

Then add in Gwyneth Paltrow and Mario Batali’s PBS cooking (and eating) show “Spain ... on the road Again.”

What does all this equal? Marketing opportunities, Piñanes says. And higher search engine rankings.

Basically, all of the outside influences mean that when third-party sites, including YouTube, play the Rodrigues music videos, or the NBA site mentions Spain, it causes PortugalSpainBoth.com’s site rankings to organically rise as potential tourists check out the referenced countries.

Leaving little to chance, though, Piñanes plans to cement more partnerships this year that will enhance SEO and increase tourism.

“The power of [the] Internet for us is very, very important,” Piñanes explains. “[So] we try to empower our marketing online, especially with alliances with the most important portals ... in cooperation with other partners, tour operators, important companies.”

In addition to strategic partnerships with U.S. travel agent networks, including Virtuoso of Fort Worth, Texas, Signature Travel Network of Marina del Rey, Calif. and Travel Leaders of Eden Prairie, Minn., Piñanes is working to ensure that more comes to Americans’ minds when they think of the Iberian Peninsula than the running of the bulls in Pamplona.

For instance, he is working with the European Travel Commission to partner with seven European countries’ tourism offices (including Portugal) to promote art, architecture and culture through a project dubbed “Art Europe.” (The commission’s site for tourists, visiteurope.com, also links directly to Portugal’s and Spain’s official tourism sites.)

Overcoming the Odds

The most recent statistics Piñanes has show that 2007 was a banner year. It represented the most spectacular increase Spain has seen in tourism from the U.S. since the terror attacks on American soil on Sept. 11, 2001 made potential travelers too jittery to climb on planes.

Then Spain had to recover after terrorists bombed trains in Madrid on March 11, 2004. But by the close of 2005, Piñanes says, nerves calmed and the U.S. economy was doing better, so tourism rates began climbing again.

So, despite the U.S. recession, Piñanes believes U.S. tourism to his country will continue its slow climb because of all of these marketing efforts and, especially, SEO.

That's because those who inhabit the U.S. have never stopped exploring, ever since Ponce de León landed on America's southern coast and pronounced it Florida (Spanish for "flowery"). In other words, for those who find vacations revitalizing, travel SEO may be helping them search for and find the secret to a long, happy life. Or at least a rejuvenating vacation.