The Next Generation: Looking at UTK Students’ Potential Future Engagement with GSMNP

Abstract
The purpose of this research was to understand the next generation’s, aka Gen Z’s, engagement with Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GSMNP) by studying the motivations and perceptions surrounding engagement with GSMNP amongst undergraduate students enrolled for the 2018-2019 school year at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK). The various research findings informed marketing strategy applications for potential use by GSMNP.

Introduction
The research topic was sparked by a Visitor Study conducted in 2008 by the National Park Service (NPS) Social Science Program in which 16-25 was the least represented age group (Papadogiannaki). The issue was then refined during an email conversation with Julie Whitted, Class Coordinator for Experience Your Smokies, and Melinda Whitted, Social Science Program.

What are the motivations and perceptions surrounding engagement with Great Smoky Mountains National Park amongst undergraduate students enrolled for the 2018-2019 school year at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville?

In an effort to incorporate key topics learned as a marketing student, the following research question was also asked:

What can Great Smoky Mountains National Park do to engage the next generation of visitors, volunteers, donors, fundraisers, and activists?

Marketing Channels
52% of all respondents recalled seeing promotions for GSMNP on some form of social media channel. Nearly all focus group participants mentioned the use of social media to reach UTK students was a good idea.

Social Media as a Marketing Channel
These findings point to the recommended use of social media to attract 18 to 25-year-olds through the use of influencers, hashtags, story takeovers, story features, advertisements, etc.

Use of Exposure to Increase Engagement Motivation
Since the majority of those who had not visited GSMNP, 94.55% indicated that they were interested in visiting. 30.91% of those interested explained “I like the outdoors / parks / wildlife / mountains” and 29.09% explained “Seems cool, fun, and beautiful.”

Following focus group discussions, the distribution of interest in getting involved with GSMNP shifted further towards "extremely interested" and "very interested.”

Reference