

## **If the Picture is Crooked—Adjust the Frame On Re-Branding Timeshare**

By David Skinner

In the fall of 2007, I had the pleasure of attending the American Resort Developers Association, Trustee Retreat in Chicago. Near the close of the three-day event, association president, Howard Nusbaum, took the stage and officially announced the launch of a new and ambitious marketing initiative. He then introduced the five other people on the stage. These were the professionals—the hired guns, the project consultants from the prestigious global PR firm of Burson-Marsteller. Their mission: to re-brand the word timeshare in the mind of the consumer.

You should first know that an audience of timeshare developers is a tough house to play. This one was no different. They quickly voiced their concerns en masse regarding the enormity and risk of such a project. For a moment there, the official launching nearly turned into a public lynching. But Nusbaum kept his cool and control of the audience. Give the man some credit! Eventually, a compromise was reached with Nusbaum recanting a bit. “Perhaps re-branding is too strong a word,” he said. “Maybe re-coloring is a better description. Yes, we’re re-coloring timeshare.”

One outspoken attendee summed it up this way: “Whether you call it re-branding or re-coloring, reinventing or redecorating, it’s still timeshare to the public and we’re stuck with it. The problem is not the end product, but the sales process, and no one on the outside can fix that. It has to be solved on the inside.”

For my part, I was more distressed over what I heard from the professionals as they described the steps of their rebranding campaign. They so easily used the words leisure, vacation, and timeshare interchangeably, as though they were the same. Unfortunately, confusion over the exact meaning of these words is widespread, even within the timeshare industry. The “hired guns” clearly had not done their homework.

If branding is about anything, it’s about words. Successful brands use precise words that speak directly to our psyche, words that engage and energize our inner totem and urge us to action. This isn’t new; branding has been around for a long, long time. You might recognize the quotation, “In the beginning was the word.”

The results of my own company’s market study, as well as those leaked from the ARDA initiative, showed a significant and deep-seated negative bias toward timeshare or anything that hints of it. So great is this disposition that any attempt to re-brand, rename, or re-color without a corresponding product improvement would appear dishonest, even deceitful, to the consumer.

You see, a brand’s power to motivate comes from the associated memories of the product experience imprinted in the mind over time. For example, if as a child you and your

friends often went to McDonald's and had wonderful outings, you would probably have a positive brand impression yet today, due as much to the childhood experience as the "secret sauce." When a brand impression extends beyond individuals and into the community, it can become a powerful social force. An example would be the view held by some communities that Wal-Mart is bad for their local economy. This is what has happened with timeshare.

Here's an actual example of this bias. As part of our study, I attended several focus groups and watched from the other side of the glass. On one occasion, and unbeknownst to the ten or so in the group, they were all timeshare owners. The meeting facilitator steered the conversation to the different vacation choices available, asking participants about their opinions and experiences. It was amazing to see what lengths each person went to hide the fact of their timeshare ownership. After several minutes, one lady slipped and let the truth be known. Suddenly, everyone had timeshare stories to share and reveled in the camaraderie. Afterwards, one person confessed, "I did not want others to think I had been duped or suckered into buying timeshare."

Six months after the ARDA retreat, Mr. Nusbaum reported that Phase I of the marketing initiative was complete, and that Phase II was scheduled for completion by convention time in April. However, there had been some changes along the way. The re-branding or re-coloring of timeshare had indeed proven an enormous, if not impossible, task. As that outspoken retreat attendee had stated, and as the professionals discovered, "It's still timeshare to the public and we're stuck with it." As a result, timeshare would not be re-branded or re-colored, but rather realigned and made less noticeable alongside fractional and other shared ownership products.

Before we throw in the towel, however, let's look at how another endeavor under similar constraints was successful in "re-framing." Not re-branding, re-coloring, or re-positioning, but creating a new "frame" around a product. I'll call as my expert witness Frank Luntz, author of, *Words That Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear*.

Luntz uses the example of Las Vegas, with its former reputation as America's gambling capital, and all the negative associations and history that went with it. The effort to re-brand the Strip as "family friendly" proved a disaster. The negative bias was too great. What the city fathers did next was a stroke of genius. They moved to a higher contextual frame. They promoted themselves as America's gaming capital. The gambling hasn't changed, but now it's more wholesome and acceptable, because everyone enjoys playing games in which gambling is a part. Do you see the difference?

Albert Einstein said, "You can't solve a problem at the level on which it was created." In the case of Las Vegas, its branding problem was successfully resolved by re-framing at a higher level of public awareness. Timeshare needs to do the same.

And here is where we return to the cause of my distress at the ARDA meeting. First let's get the message straight. As long as we mistakenly substitute one word and its meaning for another—"muddle the message"—we will fail to clearly imprint our product's unique

qualities on the mind of the consumer. Survey results tell us to avoid using the word timeshare. It has too many negatives. But since we're stuck with "timeshare," as Las Vegas was with "gambling," we need to raise the contextual frame of our product to something everyone feels positive about and that is . . . *leisure*.

The difference between gaming and gambling corresponds to the difference between leisure and timeshare. Timeshare exists within the context, or frame, of leisure. That's the difference. While leisure and vacations do share similarities, they are not the same. They speak to different needs. It's got to be one or the other—not both, or we create brand discord.

Leisure has a specific meaning: it is the time available after one's basic needs are met. It has a history dating back to Aristotle, who declared that leisure was "the first principle of all action." Leisure is the foundation for culture and the arts. It is the driving force behind scientific discovery and technological advancement. It holds a dear meaning to every person and a great value to society. Leisure is an end in itself.

Vacations, on the other hand, are a byproduct of the industrial age. The word came into use in the 1800s from the English practice of closing the courts and schools for the summer—they were vacated. Likewise, vacations exist as a respite from work, in order to invigorate one for more work. Vacations serve as an antidote to our labor and exist solely within the "frame" of work.

Leisure activity is not limited to mere relaxation; rather, it encompasses a spectrum, from extreme sports to pool-side repose. It is neither laziness nor idleness: it must be pursued. Leisure includes recreation, travel and adventure, family outings, even intimate moments with a loved one. These are all activities enjoyed during and for the purpose of leisure.

Timeshare plays a supportive role here. Timeshare owners have invested their earnings as well as their time to assure that leisure is an important and lasting part of their lives. For the same reason an avid golfer will buy his own clubs or a tennis player her own racquet and equipment, timeshare owners want to ensure the quality and enjoyment of their leisure. Leisure enhances the quality of life, and timeshare is a part of that.

I'm not suggesting I have the answer to re-branding or re-coloring timeshare, but while we are waiting around for a solution to occur from the inside, we can begin re-framing timeshare from the outside, within the context of leisure. I suggest we embrace a new paradigm: rather than vacation ownership and leisure travel, why not vacation travel and leisure ownership?

At its best, timeshare *is* leisure ownership.

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He has spent his professional life in real estate brokerage, investment banking and securities, and as an entrepreneur. These qualities came together to form the basis upon which Holiday is built.

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