



CENTRAL COUNTIES

Executive Director Update September 2014

I am a little disappointed to be writing this introduction. You see, this past weekend I was nominated to participate in the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge and thought it would be a great opportunity to create a video of my thoughts on this world-wide phenomenon. Unfortunately, my plan was thwarted by a couple of my kids, which you can see why - [HERE](#).

The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge quantifies the power of social media – to the tune of \$70M (according to Maclean’s Magazine) compared to \$2.5M during the same period last year. As a destination marketer, our whole existence is trying to convert travel intention into travel purchase. The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge demonstrates social media’s ability to do just that.

When I look at the Ice Bucket Challenge as a straight social media case study, it really is quite relevant to many industries, including tourism. Every year, I intend to donate to charity. Since having kids, a main recipient is The Hospital for Sick Children, which I liken to having an insurance policy; you never want to use it but you’ll be happy it’s there if you need it. The Heart and Stroke Foundation and Cancer Society are often recipients too. I donate every year so it is safe to think that I intend to make charitable donations again this year.

Suddenly, ALS takes over the airwaves, not with splashy ads or sombre PSA’s, but with headline entertainment stories about celebrities dumping ice water on their heads which then became news stories about the fad sweeping social networks to the benefit of ALS. ALS was now on my mind and I knew it was only a matter of time before I was nominated to participate.

The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge didn’t originate with ALS. It was born, lives and will eventually die on social media, which really is today’s equivalent of “Word of Mouth”. At its’ most basic level, the message of the Ice Bucket Challenge is, “I’m doing it. It’s for a good cause. You should too.”

When I was nominated, I asked my friend LeeAnn why she chose me. She responded that she thought I would do something funny and that I knew a lot of people. And she really believed that I would do it. She was right. Even before I was nominated, I had made the decision to complete the challenge if asked and had decided on a sum of money to donate to ALS for the privilege of dumping ice water on my head. The power of social media had harnessed my intention to donate to charity, diverted it to an organization that wasn’t on my radar and converted the intention into a purchase. I chose my two nominees based for the same reasons LeeAnn chose me. 1) I know they are going to do it. 2) They both have large provincial, national and international social networks in their chosen fields. 3) They are going to nominate people who will rise to the challenge as well, keeping the cycle alive.

Now let's equate this entire social experience to tourism and pretend that Central Counties is the ALS Foundation. You can follow along substituting your municipality or your business for Central Counties.

If Central Counties is the ALS Foundation, then every other charity is a different travel destination. The typically well-funded and top-of-mind charities like the Cancer Society, Heart and Stroke Foundation and Juvenile Diabetes are equivalent to Toronto, Ottawa and Niagara Falls as top tourism destinations in Ontario. But because this challenge is driven through social networks, we are really competing on both an international and completely personal scale. I, as the consumer, intend to travel. I haven't decided where I will travel, but I have my personal favourites.

Suddenly, I start hearing about Central Counties and how "I have to visit!" At first it is from friends of friends through Twitter, Facebook, You Tube and other social media channels. But before too long, it's direct word of mouth from friends telling me that I have to go check out Central Counties Kids Road Trip or The Country Path experience because they know these are things that Trish, the boys and I will love to do.

Now, in the exact same way that I ended up dumping water on my head, I have converted my intention to travel somewhere to a commitment to travel in Central Counties because my social network is telling me that I should and I will love it. Through social media, Central Counties and its' experiences become top-of-mind to the people with intention to do these experiences.

There are a couple of caveats to complete the analogy.

- 1) ALS, while not top-of-mind, is still a legitimate and worthy charity. If the challenge had been for the Hangnail Elimination Society, I don't think it would have been as wildly successful. Using the same logic, a destination must provide a worthwhile and memorable experience.
- 2) The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge began and continues to enjoy celebrity endorsement. While that is true and one of the reason it took off like wildfire, I completed the challenge because of a direct member of my social network not because William Shatner did it. However, we should be looking for celebrity endorsements wherever we can. The Boots and Hearts Festival has been in Clarington the last few years. Wouldn't it have been great to have them Tweeting to their huge networks about how great it is to tour through Durham Region. And it doesn't have to be an A-list celebrity. You would be amazed by the dedicated amount of fans certain bloggers have, all of whom have social networks of their own.
- 3) The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge takes little to no planning and can be done in the comfort of your home. True, but if you create great experiences with instant reward for purchase (third night free or added value tours, etc.) you can make it more compelling to book.

I'm not saying that any of us is going to see exponential revenue increases like ALS is enjoying. However, as the Ice Bucket Challenge proves, social media has the power to convert intention to a sale and we should all be capitalizing on its power every chance that we get. The question is, "What's your Ice Bucket Challenge?" and who are you going to share it with?

Have a great day! **Chuck**