

Where on earth is Sarawak?

Harnessing the power of story telling to launch
a new meeting destination



ICCA Best Marketing Award Entry 2008

Sarawak. Malaysia. Borneo



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CHALLENGE

THE MARKETING CHALLENGE

The establishment of Malaysia's first independent Convention Bureau in an offshore outpost - Sarawak, East Malaysia, raised more than a few eyebrows around the nation.

Sarawak currently hosts less than 2 per cent of Malaysia's meetings market and faced significant challenges including:

- Lack of suitable large meeting venues
- Shortage of hotel rooms
- Air access and connectivity issues
- Lack of specialist meeting service providers
- Inactive local associations
- Low international profile

The 2006 meeting industry consultant's initial situation report found that International Meeting Planners could not even place Sarawak on the world map and when prompted with the name of its capital city - Kuching - most then thought it was part of China. In regard to local hosts, the Directory of Malaysian Associations showed only a handful in Sarawak with the vast majority headquartered in Peninsular Malaysia.



As one of the two outlying States of Malaysia, situated on the mystical Island of Borneo, Sarawak is perhaps best known for its colorful Colonial history under the rule of the British White Rajahs and its unique long houses, home to the former warrior tribes of Iban head hunters.

With the decision to significantly invest in new meetings infrastructure, including an international convention and exhibition centre, major airport upgrade and the construction of five new hotels, the time had come to launch a fresh new meetings destination into an already crowded international convention arena.

Our objective was to find creative ways to build awareness of Sarawak as a meetings destination among international meeting planners and to encourage and motivate our potential local hosts to bid for conventions.

PLAN OF ATTACK

From the outset our approach has been based on innovation and creativity in all that we do. Our three marketing mantras are:



Dare to be different

In a crowded market you have to first stand out from the crowd to be noticed - it's better to be different than to be better.



Harness the power of story telling

Our industry is full of jargon, complex facts and figures, business proposals based on economic returns that eventually become comparisons of meaningless millions. As an unknown newcomer we must also touch people's hearts and minds to get an emotional response.



Leverage the "Borneo" Brand in the international market

"Borneo" is already a powerful international tourism brand. By linking Sarawak as part of Borneo we solve the geography problem. The traditional Iban warrior personified in a powerful image from renowned photographer David Kirkland became our core destination image and from this basis we have positioned Sarawak by using the stories of our past linked to today's business world.

MARKETING

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

For the purpose of this submission we have selected only certain elements of our overall business plan to illustrate the use of story telling, daring to be different and leveraging the Borneo brand. It therefore should not be viewed as a complete blueprint of all the marketing activities that have been undertaken in launching our destination.

THE HOME FRONT

Having opened our doors of our brand new offices and set up our team, we were not surprised when simply putting up our sign board “Sarawak Convention Bureau” and having a spectacular launch event in the State Parliament was not enough to have industry partners and potential convention hosts knocking on our door seeking assistance.



The launch theme “drumming up business for Sarawak” focused on our ten key industry sectors each represented by a business leader and government official. All the invited guests were involved in the launch symbolically beating their drums in unison to send a message to the world that Sarawak was open for business.

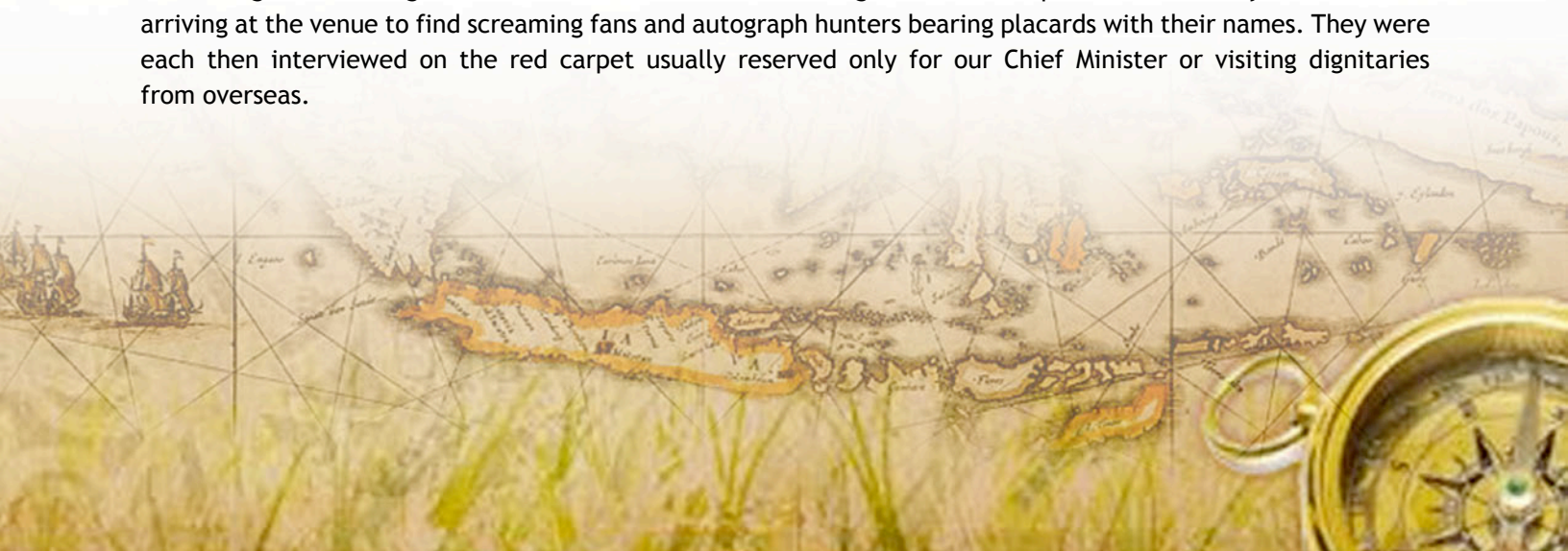


The video produced for the launch used the power of story telling. It introduced Ujai, a young Iban boy living in a traditional long house who was given a medal by his father as a toddler and told that if he studied hard one day he would become a great “son of Sarawak”

The video, told in his own words, follows Ujai as he travels to school by boat, graduates from university and travels overseas to work for a global company. There he is able to convince the board to bring their next meeting to Sarawak. The video ends with a joyous reunion as Ujai introduces his business colleagues to his father and encourages other Sarawakians to also become “Sons of Sarawak” by bringing conventions home.

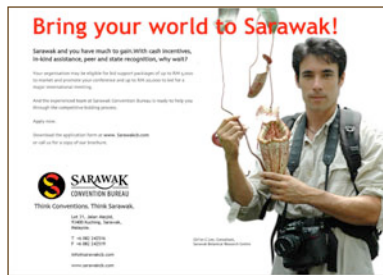
Anak Sarawak Medal

All our local convention hosts become “Anak Sarawak” medal recipients and are recognized at an annual gala awards night. The inaugural event was themed as an Oscar night with all recipients collected by limousine and arriving at the venue to find screaming fans and autograph hunters bearing placards with their names. They were each then interviewed on the red carpet usually reserved only for our Chief Minister or visiting dignitaries from overseas.





We now have our first 35 Anak Sarawak Ambassadors each of who have already secured a new convention for Sarawak and many of them agreed to become advocates for their peers by featuring in our local media advertisements.



Chien Lee, a botanist with a passion for pitcher plants was one of our first Anak Sarawak recipients. Chien actually formed a new society devoted to carnivorous plants as the platform for him to organize and run the inaugural Nepenthes Summit in Kuching last year. The event attracted one hundred and fifty two people from eight countries who also took the opportunity to enjoy field trips led by Chien into the surrounding rainforest to view an amazing variety of wild pitcher plants.

TAKING OUR MESSAGE TO THE WORLD

To leverage on the established brand of Borneo our public relations, media liaison, advertising and even activities at trade shows has been built on the uniqueness of Sarawak's charming local hosts and sharing stories from the rainforest.

Some examples include:



Trade Shows

Matthew Ngau, a local artist and sape player from the Orang Ulu community accompanied us to the AIME trade show in Melbourne where he explained the intricate design of the “tree of life” motif and hand drew temporary tattoos on visitors to the stand.



Sadly the tradition of tattooing among the ethnic tribes of Sarawak is in danger of dying out, as parents often choose not to continue it with their children, in fear that it may hinder them from being accepted in the business world. The International Tattoo Convention held in Sibu Central Sarawak last year was a chance for famed tattoo artists from around the world to showcase their art to visitors and also to re-assure members of the local community that their body art was valued and revered in the international community.

PUBLIC RELATIONS MEDIA



Our warrior accompanied by beautifully costumed local performers has been creating a stir when visiting international places of interest such as the Great Wall of China and the Sydney Opera House in conjunction with our client and media events.



By developing a new product list of top 10 incentives that showcase the best of Borneo by way of signature events such as the Longhouse theme party; Orang utan Conservation Program; Kayaking in the Rainforest; Cocktails in the Caves; Rocking at the Rainforest Music Festival; Teeing Off in the Clouds; Long Boating on the River; Cooking Up a Storm with the traditional local foods; Malay Hari Raya open house and Gawai Harvest Festival. Excellent media coverage was generated on these new products by utilizing them with our first international site groups.

They are also featured in our first Meeting and Incentive Planners Guide - a 140 page guide giving details not only of the venues and suppliers but also 38 unique facts and interesting snippets of information such as:

Sarawakians are always concerned for the well being of visitors and guests and it is unforgiveable for a guest to go hungry. Instead of greeting people with "apa khabar?" (How are you) they often prefer to use "sudah makan?" (Have you eaten)?

WHAT'S IN A NAME?



Mary's solution suites Kuching tea

WHEN the architects of the new RM300 million Sarawak Convention and Exhibition Centre were seeking inspiration for a roof design, they didn't have far to go. They took a leaf out of the book - of other the imagination - of Mary Ann Samung, tea lady for KDC Architects, Kuching.

Mary suggested what else but - a tea leaf.

The new convention centre, being built for the Sarawak government on a six-hectare rooftop site on the Kuching town, is a kilometre from the city centre, and is due to open in late 2008.

"We were searching for an aesthetically pleasing but functional design that would also cope with the tropical downpours that come with the monsoon rain each year," said Thomas Ling, KDC design associate.

"Mary, who was serving tea at the meeting, told us about the local 'ting' leaf which is used for roofing, and its unique pattern and shape reminded the roof for soft and curvy quality. The rain water flows naturally into the central area and cascades off the new rim, leaving a unique water feature that will also serve as irrigation for the landscaped area around the new convention centre."

Capacities in the centre include 1500 in primary, a 2000 capacity banquet hall and 14 break-out meeting rooms. The largest pillar-free exhibition space is 2000sqm.

The state government is currently selecting an operator to manage the centre and in the interim, the Sarawak Convention Bureau, headed by its new chief executive, JH Henry, will market the centre.

By the team

As you can imagine, it was not an easy task to convince the Chief Minister of Sarawak to change the name of the Convention Centre from its working title "Sarawak Convention and Exhibition Centre" to "Borneo Convention Centre - Kuching". As the largest meetings venue and visual representation of Sarawak's meetings industry, our new Convention Centre is now set to encapsulate all the elements of the Borneo rainforest brand that are inherent across both its design and operation.

But originally, it was the story of Mary the talented tea lady that sparked curiosity and interest among the international trade media when it was revealed in one of our very early media releases that the idea for the centre's unique roof design had come from her.

SALES

THAT'S ALL VERY WELL - BUT DOES IT BRING IN BUSINESS?

Everyone accepts that marketing and image building are important in our business - but does image and branding also win bids? A very powerful question and one that we struggled with in our sales team meetings on specific bids. For many year's I have been preaching that successful bidding should focus on the topic and subject matter of the bid rather than the destination itself. However, our basic principles of daring to be different and story telling have been successfully carried through into many of our individual bid strategies.



For example, to demonstrate our commitment as a green destination, we have moved to web based bids wherever possible. Our bids are done in the form of a web site which saves printing and distribution costs and has the added advantage that once confirmed the web site can, with a few modifications, become the promotional web site for the convention which is an added benefit for organisers. The web site bid for the 2nd Global Geotourism Conference can be viewed at www.scb.henstudio.com/geotourism

We have found that most committees are open to this new approach, just as you at ICCA have agreed to receive our BMA entry in the form of a web link.



Another example is one of our biggest bid wins to date the 2010 World Rainforest Interhash - a major event that was won by 500 votes against stiff competition from Bali, Kenya, and Peninsular Malaysia in Perth this April. It is the first time in the event's sixteen year history that a destination has won the right to host a World Interhash event in their first attempt.

For this particular bid the Kuching Hornbill Hash bid under the banner: **Sarawak - Borneo**. The web based promotion was backed up by a strong delegation attending the event in Perth and despite warnings from the organisers that it was not a good idea as our mascot would be mobbed or even injured - our warrior was this time accompanied by a larger than life Hornbill - named Harry - who roamed the race meets and bid venue handing out promotional giveaways and garnering votes.



In fact, Sarawak is known as the land of the hornbills but the feathered variety are increasingly difficult to find in the wild, so Harry does a great job of bringing our State emblem to life. This is also carried through into our team corporate look which uses the State colors of black, red and yellow for scarves and ties with a local artist's depiction of a stylized hornbill - just in case Harry or his feathered friends aren't around.

RE-CHARGE IN A NEW WORLD - SARAWAK, BORNEO

By far the biggest single investment to date that embodies our marketing philosophy is the four minute destination commercial. Re-charge in a New World - Sarawak, Borneo.

For our first production, rather than try to showcase the whole destination, we chose to produce a story-lined TV commercial adding a touch of 'tongue in cheek' humor. We also did not try to shy away from the fact that international meeting planners don't yet know where Sarawak is.

The story line features Sarawak's Iban community and sets up a climatic meeting between overseas business visitors and our unique local hosts. It positions Sarawak and its location on the Island of Borneo as a new and vibrant business destination where the traditions of the past are still upheld but followed in a way that is very much a part of today's fast paced business world.

The scripted commercial was completed on a ten-day shoot - which included shipping a cast and crew of about a hundred people, and two tons of equipment for a week into the rainforests of Sarawak.



Since its release in April this year the video commercial has won three international awards including the Diamond Award for Best Overall Entry across all categories at Das Goldene Stadttor Competition held in conjunction with ITB Berlin; a Gold Camera at the US International Film and Video Awards and a 2008 PATA Gold Award.

More importantly, it has helped us capture the hearts and minds of our decision makers and played a part in our latest bid wins that have seen us achieve a 58 per cent bid success ratio and secure 35 new meetings bringing in 16,500 delegates over the next three years. Not bad for a new kid on the block!



MONEY MATTERS

BUDGET FOR MARKETING INITIATIVES SHOWCASED

Launch Event - Drumming up Business for Sarawak - 300 guests	Euro 25,000
Anak Sarawak - local host 3 minute video	Euro 5,100
Anak Sarawak Oscar Award Night - 120 guests	Euro 9,000
National Media Campaign - production and placements	Euro 40,800
Harry the Hornbill costume	Euro 6,120
Corporate gift range:	
Silk scarf - Euro 10 per piece	
Neck tie - Euro 8 per piece	
Warrior plate - Euro 12 per piece	
Anak Sarawak Medal - Euro 8 per piece	Euro 8,000
Re-charge in a new world - Sarawak Borneo commercial	Euro 58,000
	Euro 152,020



RETURNS

Our marketing objectives were to build awareness of Sarawak among international meeting planners and encourage and motivate potential local hosts to bid for conventions.

Surprisingly we have been more successful in winning regional and international business than with national meetings. While many of our regional and international meetings do not yet meet the ICCA criteria they are a stepping stone along the way to building up our international credentials as a fresh new meetings destination.

Some examples of regional and international events secured include:

- International Conference of Girls Brigade April 2008 - 300 delegates
- 19th World Chinese Church Music Conference - July 2008 - 1,200 delegates
- IAF Asia Facilitators Conference - August 2008 - 200 delegates
- International Gas Union Executive Meeting - November 2008 - 120 delegates
- 18th INFNGO Asean NGO Workshop and IOGT Alcohol Policy Workshop - December 2008 - 500 delegates
- 8th World Congress of Engineering Education - May 2009 - 800 delegates
- 2nd Global Geotourism Conference - April 2010 - 250 delegates
- ASEAN Congress of Plastic Surgery and MAPACS - July 2010 - 500 delegates
- Australian Universities International Alumni Convention July 2010 - 500 delegates
- World Rainforest Interhash - July 2010 - 5,000 participants

In regard to the media and public relations returns we have been pleased with the amount of coverage received from our media releases and have also been able to leverage from the success of our video to general local publicity and coverage that has been important in establishing our credentials as a new organisation with our local stakeholders.

We also have made a good start with our 35 Anak Sarawak Ambassadors some of who are already now already planning to bid for their second convention.

Overall we have delivered at 2.71 to 1 return on investment (ROI) for our stakeholders generating Euro 6.14 million from our total expenditure of Euro 2.24 million.

LESSON LEARNED

Tips for ICCA members

Listen, learn and use ideas from ICCA and all the other conferences you attend - you have to change something in the way you operate after attending each and every conference.

Our story telling idea has its genesis from the things I learnt at the ICCA Conference in Copenhagen from Mr Claus Witten Borg who told how Lego put the focus on the story and used it to sell their products.

Our media article approach with human interest, quirky photos was taught by Martin Lewis in his media workshop at the past two ICCA Conferences.

Recruiting local hosts and Ambassador Programs were part of both the former BMA presentations when I was with the Perth Bureau and presented at ICCA in Cancun and Cape Town.

Leveraging the sight, smell, and power of a well known brand so that you can smash it by living it through every aspect of your company was from the brand king Martin Lindstrom in Pattaya last year.



Finally - don't be afraid to fail - we had no idea if our adverts and video would work and the more different they are the more likely they will evoke strong negative or positive feed back. So failure is a right of passage. Without it you will never be able to reap the rewards of success - sometimes beyond your wildest dreams!