

COMMUNITY COLUMNIST — Pure Michigan all that's good about our state



Monday

May 6, 2013 at 12:01 AM May 6, 2013 at 6:05 AM

As one Hope College student told me recently, “The ads bring to mind everything that is good about Michigan.”

Teresa Heinz Housel

Prior to relocating to Michigan in 2005, my interactions with the state were disheartening. In the early 1980s, my father, sister and I drove from northeast Ohio to Detroit, where my father hoped to visit a baseball card collectors’ show.

I don’t remember much about the trip, but my few memories include my father’s increasing anxiety as the car’s fuel depleted. We navigated what seemed like endless dark roads with service stations closed for the night.

Finally, my father located someone to ask about the card show, only to be informed that the show had occurred the previous weekend. My father’s misinformation was an easy mistake to make in the days before Internet. With all the hotels strangely full, we turned around and drove back to Ohio.

Now, more than 30 years later, I have lived in Michigan for almost eight years. It was fascinating to take my first adult trip to Michigan in 2004 when my husband and I searched for a place to live. . I admired the beautiful lakeshore landscape and later noticed the Pure Michigan billboards along the highway in late 2006.

Birmingham’s McCann Erickson advertising agency created the Pure Michigan campaign, which markets the state as a travel and tourism destination. The campaign was launched in 2006 by

Travel Michigan, a division of the Michigan Economic Development Corp. (MEDC). Established in 1999, the state-funded MEDC was created to support Michigan's economic development.

The television, radio and print ads convey relaxation, pleasure, and reflection. The visual ads feature scenes such as fruit orchards, coasts and lighthouses, spectacular winter scenery, wineries, inland lakes, golf courses, and historic landmarks like the Grand Hotel. As one Hope College student told me recently, "The ads bring to mind everything that is good about Michigan."

In 2008, Gov. Jennifer Granholm approved an additional \$45 million in funding for the campaign. The increased funds supported Pure Michigan's national promotion that began in March 2009. This year's ads appear on more than 25 cable channels. Internationally, the campaign is marketed in southwest Ontario, Germany, and Britain, and there are plans for Asian expansion.

The campaign's financial returns indicate its success. According to an April 15 report from Longwoods International, a tourism research firm, in 2012 the Pure Michigan generated 3.8 million out-of-state visitors who spent a record amount of more than \$1 billion in Michigan. The report further indicated that tourists made 580,000 more trips to Michigan in 2012 than in 2011, with a return on investment of \$5.76 for every \$1 spent on the campaign.

Because I am not a Michigan native, I enjoy asking Hope College students about their perceptions of the Pure Michigan ads. Most tell me that they associate the campaign with the outdoors, relaxation and the actor Tim Allen, who largely grew up near Detroit and narrates the radio and television commercials.

Most students say they are aware of the campaign whether or not they are from Michigan. Students from even as far away as Arizona have noticed television ads in their local markets.

This information is intriguing in light of the tourism data: Of the out-of-state visitors who visited Michigan as a result of the campaign last year, 2.3 million came from the Great Lakes region and 1.5 million hailed from more distant markets around the country, according to the Longwoods report.

Some students argue that the ads are exaggerated and do not mention the state's negative aspects, like any ad campaign. As one told me, "They present Michigan well, or at least how it should be perceived."

With the summer tourist season approaching, I will be curious to see if Pure Michigan continually attracts tourists. This is not the first tourism organization to adopt the overall concept (New Zealand's "100% Pure" campaign has existed since 1999), but the ads certainly spotlight the state's lovely natural features that contradict those initial impressions from my family's fruitless overnight trip in 1981.

— Teresa Heinz Housel is an associate professor of communications at Hope College. Contact her at teresahousel@gamil.com.