

CREA Voluntourism Marketing Plan and Strategy

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Determining how best to market CREA's voluntourism program to English-speaking audiences is effectively a question of which *distribution* strategy to pursue.

The Fam Visit Experience

Initially, the recommended CREA voluntourism distribution strategy focuses upon selling this coming summer's familiarization (fam) experience. The purpose of this fam experience is to test the voluntourism concept and introduce it to influencers and/or intermediaries who can assist the organization in selling to audiences in the U.S. and elsewhere. This has the benefit to CREA of enabling it to receive feedback on the experience from representatives of key audiences and to identify any potential problems with its introduction in 2018 and beyond.

One component of this fam visit marketing challenge is to identify first the individuals who should be invited to participate in the experience. Several potential target audience segments have been identified for CREA but there are many possible representatives of these audience segments, ranging from professors at universities to leaders of hiking clubs. There is also the question of making the most of this fam opportunity for CREA. With CREA offering to pay the expenses of these fam visit participants (other than transportation), this is a unique opportunity to expose these representatives to CREA's work, Chamonix and Mont-Blanc, and the voluntourism experience. Should CREA concentrate its fam visit experience marketing upon *one* potential audience, or invite representatives of *multiple* audiences (even if it may be several years before those representatives can lead voluntourism trips to Chamonix)? And can CREA attract sufficient numbers of representatives of a single audience segment—such as academics leading study abroad programs—for a 2017 fam visit? Some of the organizations identified as potential



partners for CREA (and potential fam visit participants) come with considerable advantages, but also have their own disadvantages (described below).

Regardless of whether CREA decides to focus upon one or multiple audience segments for the fam visit, it will still need to qualify those representatives after inviting them. Therefore, it is recommended that interested participants complete an application which will be reviewed by CREA to determine if the individual and the audience they represent is in alignment with CREA's scientific, programmatic, and revenue objectives. Once these applications have been reviewed and approved for 2017, CREA can begin the process of preparing for their arrival.

Beyond the Fam Experience

At a strategic level, beyond the initial fam visit experience, CREA has the following distribution options available to it as an organization:

- I. **Sell directly to the end customer, the individual voluntourist**—While this audience and distribution strategy is not directly included in the aforementioned fam visit experience, it is still an important one for CREA to consider given its size and advantages. This option would enable CREA to develop a voluntourism experience exactly to its liking, one that addresses the organization's needs without interference from an outside party and without any potential compromise of its standards and expectations. It is also the option that maximizes *gross* revenue to CREA, as there will be no intermediary organization to add another layer of cost, complexity, and profit sharing to the experience. CREA can therefore sell its voluntourism experience at whatever price the market allows.

However, this is the most expensive option for CREA, one that requires the organization to develop and execute a marketing plan that reaches its target audience(s) and motivates them to invest their time and money in an international



travel experience with a largely unproven voluntourism provider. (CREA has a long and established history of scientific excellence, but very little experience as a packager and provider of tourism products.) CREA's market expectations are relatively modest—attract a small number of voluntourists for one week in the summer during the first year of launch, and attract just a few more in each subsequent summer as the program expands one week per year. Those would appear to be very reasonable and achievable objectives given the hundreds of thousands of English-speaking travelers who participate in voluntourism kinds of activities each year.

While CREA offers a relatively unique voluntourism experience—assessing climate change and performing citizen science research in the French Alps—it is entering a global category crowded with many different providers and product offerings. Given CREA's relatively low expectations and very modest resources available for sales and marketing, the organization would have to refine its target audience with laser precision, reach the audience in the digital marketing environment, fulfill their inquiries and request for more information, convert interested lookers into buyers, and manage the sale and delivery of the experience from transaction to its completion.

Given the importance of intermediaries and influencers in the student market, and that the segment often travels in organized groups, it is unlikely that any direct marketing effort aimed at students would be successful. Rather, it is the FIT (fully independent traveler) market that CREA would target—those individuals who are not traveling as part of a pre-formed group or with a leader (although they may be part of a family or traveling as a couple or couples). Based upon research and insights into this market, this would likely be a middle aged (ages 45-65), physically active, environmentally conscious, and experienced international traveler from



English-speaking countries (and especially the U.S.). It is unlikely to be families, younger couples or singles traveling alone, or travelers older than 70 years of age. With the cost of and available options for reaching this audience, it would also have to be a segment of the market specifically seeking out voluntourism and/or “citizen science” experiences. CREA does not have the marketing resources to engage in a campaign to generate interest in international voluntourism as a general travel activity. Its prospective customers would have to be in the marketplace looking for such an activity.

If CREA were to pursue this market strategy as an option, the following tactics would be recommended as components of its plan:

1. Establish a branded website presence (either within the existing CREA site or outside of it as a separate entity) that sells specifically to the English-speaking FIT audience. This website would utilize the strategies and tactics recommended in the CREA brand platform document, including the following:
 - a. Promote the destination as a significant point of difference from other voluntourism experiences.
 - b. Sell the experience through compelling photography and video.
 - c. Emphasize the credibility and experience of the organization and its staff, through vehicles such as biographical profiles and third-party endorsements.
 - d. Provide testimonials from past participants.
 - e. Communicate Chamonix’s appealing accessibility and location within Europe.
 - f. Showcase the work performed by CREA and highlight its importance.
 - g. Clearly describe details of the offered experience and the itinerary.
 - h. Make it easy for interested voluntourism travelers to engage with CREA staff via email, telephone, and social media.



- i. Communicate essential information about lodging and food, including whether specific dietary requests can be accommodated.
- j. Provide a FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) section that addresses such items as participant safety, level of physical fitness required, necessary clothing and equipment, proficiency in French required, weather information, and other information that may be asked about by interested travelers.

The website would be highly search engine optimized around key search terms related to voluntourism, climate change research, citizen science, Chamonix, the French Alps, and Mont-Blanc.

2. An English-language blog tailored to the voluntourism initiative is another solid marketing communications option that would establish engagement with traveler audiences and provide an opportunity to promote new developments, research insights, and share stories of the CREA team. But once established, a blog must be updated regularly and kept active or it will lessen CREA's legitimacy as a provider of guest-friendly experiences.
3. Develop a separate branded English social media presence on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter that can be used as a platform for sharing stories about CREA, its work, and its staff; highlighting the destination; and sharing testimonials and volunteer experiences through photography and video.
4. Create an e-mail newsletter to build a community of followers and stay engaged with participants before and after their Chamonix visit.
5. Implement a digital search engine marketing campaign (and potentially in other media as well, such as banner ads and content marketing in targeted vehicles) to reach audiences interested in voluntourism experiences. This is where the potential for the greatest marketing inefficiency would occur for CREA. Given the relatively low number of actual participants, it is conceivable the return on investment for CREA could be very poor since it would be casting such a "wide net" to reach potential voluntourists in the U.S. and elsewhere.



6. Get listed on key voluntourism digital directories which serve as a catalog of related experiences for those travelers seeking such trips.
7. Establish a process for fulfilling interested traveler inquiries and their request for more information. This can be as simple as designating someone on the CREA staff to act as the contact person responsible for answering all questions from potential participants, and creating a PDF document that can be e-mailed to inquirers to help convert them into buyers. Ideally, though, this person will also manage all guest engagement all the way from inquiry to arrival, and be available to answer questions by telephone pre-visit and upon arrival in Chamonix.
8. If it does not already have one, CREA will require a means for processing credit card payments from registered participants, and to establish deadlines for initial and final payment deadlines and a policy for refunds.

II. **Sell directly to appropriate academic audiences**—This audience has been specifically segregated from other influencers and intermediaries for two reasons. First, it is a large segment that offers the promise of substantial alignment with CREA’s research and pedagogical aims, and would likely be sympathetic to its ancillary revenue needs. And second, there are differences in how destinations and study abroad experiences are selected. In particular, there (mostly) has to be some alignment with the faculty’s academic objectives for his or her students, where the ability to provide meaningful course credit and learning experiences are often more important as other selection criteria such as destination, cost, accessibility, and safety.

With hundreds of thousands of English-speaking academic professionals worldwide, the need to identify relevant target audience segments of faculty is essential. As outlined in the profile of the study abroad market, there are numerous academic fields where a CREA voluntourism experience could fit within a course of study. For this market, CREA would provide a week-long experience to professors



leading study abroad trips at a set price to the university. In consultation with the academic professional, CREA would be responsible for the itinerary during the week and on-site logistics. The university would include the price of the CREA experience in its tuition and fees.

The benefit to the university and the academic professional is that CREA is a highly knowledgeable and established research institution with responsibility for local logistics and field study. CREA takes care of many of the details that would otherwise be left to the faculty member and provides a high caliber research experience applicable to several different fields of study. The university assumes the responsibility for its student “volunteers,” and markets the trip to its student population.

While this distribution strategy minimizes the marketing investment required of CREA, it does not necessarily reduce its role in facilitating the “sale” to students by the university. CREA should still implement many of the tactics outlined above in the marketing approach for the FIT voluntourist segment, including a dedicated website presence, a regular blog, and social media. With this distribution strategy, CREA must realize it has to think like a professor, a student, and a parent. The development of these marketing tools builds trust with those sub-segments of the market.

Additionally, CREA should create a PDF document that can be easily e-mailed or printed by the university and others to help promote the voluntourism program, even if the document is a “glamour” piece that directs interested students and parents to the website for more detail. It can also be a collateral piece that professors and study abroad offices can distribute in classroom presentations, or easily share with those academic professionals inside and out of the university who may not yet be aware of CREA and the voluntourism program.



To participate in this market, CREA must develop a database that can be used for contacting prospective influencers and academic participants in the category. Most of this contact would occur electronically, via email, but capturing other key information such as mailing addresses, academic field of interest, and whether the person has influence over study abroad trips would be beneficial as well. This can be achieved through a simple email database system such as Constant Contact or a more sophisticated customer relationship management (CRM) program such as Salesforce.com. The database can be used to distribute an e-mail newsletter to announce CREA news, promote voluntourism opportunities, and maintain contact with academic professionals. Building a large database will not occur overnight; using resources such as listserv to promote CREA may help hasten its development.

An English-speaking CREA staff person would also need to be designated for this audience segment, to answer questions and guide interested parties through the process from inquiry to arrival.

The key challenge for CREA and this audience is alignment with faculty interests and academic programming. If too much customization is demanded of CREA for each student group, it could be a drain on staff time. As an organization, CREA does seem capable of being nimble and willing to work with interested parties to meet their needs, but it cannot compromise its research or build in excessive customized experiences.

- III. **Sell to respectable intermediary organizations that package voluntourism experiences to travelers**—There are numerous different global organizations that create and package voluntourism experiences for travelers, offering many different kinds of voluntourism experiences--from religious mission-related trips, to visits to orphanages in the developing world, to highly sophisticated professional tour operators. Some are highly experienced providers in the category, while others



simply serve as a conduit for members or others to participate in shared travel experiences via organized trips. Some of these organizations are for-profit corporations, and others are non-profit philanthropic providers. Broadly speaking across the different types of experiences available, the voluntourism category is growing rapidly, and there are many new entities rushing to take advantage of a growing interest in these experiences among both the Millennial generation (18-35 year old travelers) and the Baby Boomer segment (those travelers ages 53-70).

CREA's distribution strategy obstacles are several with this audience: (a) finding the right organizational partner(s) that aligns with its research and pedagogical interests; (b) identifying a revenue stream that can be achieved via partnership that is sustainable and fair to CREA; and (c) building trust with a partner that may be promoting trips to other destinations at the same time as it organizes trips to Chamonix.

There are three potential revenue sources available to CREA using this distribution strategy:

1. Duplicating the strategy outlined above for academic professionals and selling a "one-price" CREA voluntourism experience to partner organizations which then resell to their customers (generally, individual travelers).
2. Participating in a revenue sharing agreement with the partner organization.
3. Partnering with a philanthropic-minded voluntourism or travel organization that will make a financial contribution to CREA as part of its outreach and programming.

While appealing for reasons of philanthropy and partnering with like-minded, mission-driven organizations, there are a limited number of entities which have explicitly outlined their willingness to pursue the third option above. Additionally, this approach likely does not maximize CREA's revenue potential through



voluntourism initiatives, as it is mostly dependent upon discretion of the partner organization.

The second option is appealing, if only because it rewards both the partner organization and CREA for performance and achievement of shared objectives. Such an arrangement would have to be fair to CREA, however, since the organization is providing the expertise, credibility, content, and much of the logistics for the voluntourism experience. In return, the partnering organization provides the marketing and sales function associated with selling the trip, and assumes much of the responsibility for its financial success. Of course, CREA must achieve a greater return than simply covering its costs associated with providing the voluntourism experience.

There are some powerful entities participating in the voluntourism category which are potentially worthy partners for CREA. They bring years of experience and considerable marketing savvy to the category. But CREA must also consider its position as the “lesser” partner in negotiating with many of these organizations (even the non-profit ones). CREA does offer great value to a potential partner—established credibility, local knowledge, a highly desirable location. But it would be dependent upon the intermediary to sell the experience to travelers, including likely marketing through valuable databases of past and prospective customers. That could sustain CREA’s voluntourism program for years to come. This approach would also greatly minimize the marketing efforts required in the other distribution options described previously—there would be little need for an enhanced website presence, dedicated social media, blog, or an e-newsletter.

The greatest revenue opportunity for CREA in this particular distribution option (through an intermediary provider) is probably the first one described above. But it would require an organization willing to partner with and pay CREA’s price for its



voluntourism experience (its costs plus the “profit” desired from a voluntourism program), and align with its objectives and vision. It would also require time to research and identify these organizations, and for CREA to vet them as partners.



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