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Saturday, December 22, 2007

'Scary, Scaly' Aliens a Big Help to N.M. Economy

By [Michael Cerletti](#)

Secretary, N.M. Tourism Department

Now that everyone, it seems, has put in their two cents worth, it is only right that you should hear from the folks that brought you the "scary, scaly, drooling aliens" in the first place— your friends at the state of New Mexico Tourism Department.

We offer a big round of applause to Associated Press reporter Mark Evans. Without his story, our current advertising campaign—"The Best Place in the Universe: New Mexico, Earth"— might have caused nary a ripple in the great sea that is national advertising. Instead, it became a media shot heard 'round the world.

While a \$900,000 advertising campaign (fiscal year 2007) may seem like a waste of money to those very few New Mexicans who think they are unaffected by the state's \$5 billion dollar tourism industry, Evans is well aware \$900,000 is a drop in the bucket compared to the \$10 million to \$15 million that Colorado, Utah and Arizona each spend.

Evans parlayed our New Mexico's \$900,000 into national celebrity. His story appeared in countless newspapers and television stations around the world, its marketing value incalculable. The Tourism Department's two Web sites received nearly 33,000 unique visitors during the four days following the story's release— in addition to the 27,000 visits the sites received during the initial campaign— and of the nearly 28,000 folks that voted in an AOL.com poll in response to the story, two thirds said they liked the ad.

Notwithstanding the critics of the campaign— some of whom are state tourism industry people— the campaign is working. The position of the tourism department has always been that if research indicated that the campaign was not working, it would have been scrapped and a new one initiated.

The ad campaign initially targeted two specific markets: Minneapolis-St. Paul and San Diego, chosen for a variety of reasons, including non-stop air service to Albuquerque. The campaign, which included those now-famous television commercials, billboards, print media, Web sites and coffee sleeves, began in those markets April 1 and ended in early June.

There was no vacation giveaway tie-in, no free hotel rooms, no free rental car; nothing to make the intended audience act on what they had just seen except to visit the tourism department Web site and get more information on New Mexico, thus influencing their travel plans.

A post-campaign perception study conducted in June, which determines if the ads actually increased awareness about New Mexico, revealed that 47 percent of those media-blitzed residents surveyed remembered seeing New Mexico's "alien" advertising.

More extensive research is ongoing. Determining the full impact of the advertising has only just begun.

Another reason— although, perhaps less significant— to keep the campaign alive is that it has earned the respect of the advertising industry, with the winning of an Adrian Award, the foremost national competition for travel and tourism marketing.

It is, as the Journal says, an award "given by ad men to ad men." That is much the same as the Pulitzer Prize given by newspaper people to

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newspaper people; the Academy Award, given by movie people to movie people, the Emmy ... but you get the picture.

Accordingly, "The Best Place in the Universe. New Mexico, Earth" ad campaign is not going to be scrapped. This campaign is working as well or better than any New Mexico state tourism advertising effort in recent memory.

We would like to thank Gov. Bill Richardson for his support. No one appreciates more the fact that tourism is the largest private sector employer in New Mexico and the second-largest private industry, accounting for more than 80,000 jobs and attracting more than 25 million visitors per year.

Dollars spent by travelers to New Mexico produce a ripple effect, \$40 into the state's economy for each \$1 spent on advertising. The tourism industry in New Mexico has a huge, positive impact on the bottom line.

Promoting tourism in New Mexico requires a lot of hard work and, at times, taking a few calculated risks and thinking outside the box. Although there are a few folks in the industry who would rather rest on what laurels they may have and play it safe, record-high gas prices and increased competition for the tourism dollar from neighboring states means New Mexico must continue to market efficiently and aggressively, targeting both long time friends and potential new friends.

And as for the ongoing tempest in a tea pot surrounding "The Best Place in the Universe. New Mexico, Earth," this little tea pot could benefit from a tempest. This isn't about aliens; it's about selling New Mexico. It's about trying something fun, different and, yes, a bit off the wall, that just might work.

Tourism in the Land of Enchantment didn't become a \$5 billion-a-year business by always playing it safe.

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