

# Tropical Shipping banks on boosting tourism

With coins in hand, Tropical Shipping tries to lure back cruise passengers to the Caribbean for longer stays.

by Robyn Nissim

**B**elying a commonly held view that American companies rarely plan beyond the next fiscal quarter, Tropical Shipping has created a tourism marketing campaign that looks to pay off sometime in the unforeseeable future.

"It's going to take three or four years to measure the impact of the program," admitted Rick Murrell, president of the Palm Beach, Fla.-based carrier.

But that's beside the point. "We want to build a bigger and brighter Caribbean," Murrell said. If tourism grows in the Caribbean, "in the end, the Caribbean wins and then Florida wins because we're a big source of that business."



*Tropical Shipping has created a unique marketing program aimed at boosting tourism in the Caribbean.*

## How to get 'em back

Murrell dreamed up the "Come back to the Caribbean" campaign a few years ago but had no idea of how to go about implementing it. With the Caribbean business so dependent on tourism, and Tropical Shipping one of the main suppliers to the tourism businesses in the region, he realized the only way for his company to grow was for tourism to grow. But Murrell was stymied by one major problem: "How can we make tourism grow when we're

not in the tourism business?" he wondered.

Murrell was aware of certain statistics that seemed to open up a world of possibility: "Eight million cruise ship guests will visit the Caribbean in 2003. Of the 8 million cruise visitors, only 30 percent will take another cruise over the next three years. That leaves 70 percent who are taking vacations other than cruises. That's 13 million opportunities for people to come back to the islands. How can we get them to return? How do we use a

tangible asset to stimulate a return?"

The answer came in the form of a jarful of Mardi Gras doubloons at a friend's house. People hold onto these coins, he thought. They're souvenirs. Then the whole plan came into focus. Tropical Shipping will make special coins, have them represent specific values for extended stays in the Caribbean, and then will work closely with tour operators and the islands' Ministries of Tourism to distribute them.

## Minting the coin campaign

After the idea for the campaign took shape, Murrell and his company took the plan on the road to sell it to the folks in the Caribbean.

"At first I said to myself, what is in it for Tropical Shipping?" said Monique Sibilly Hodge, assistant commissioner of the Department of Tourism of the U.S. Virgin Islands.

"There's not a direct benefit to Tropical — the intent of the program is to solicit business for the U.S. Virgin Islands."

But there was no cost to the islands, and Tropical Shipping had a long history of community involvement in the Caribbean, so the U.S. Virgin Islands signed onto the program on a trial basis. As did the islands of Grenada and St. Kitts.

The New Orleans Mint, the same company that produced the famous Mardi Gras doubloons, printed

---

## Rick Murrell, president of Tropical Shipping, was stymied by one major problem: "How can we make tourism grow when we're not in the tourism business?"

---

up thousands of coins with each island's logo and the address of a Web site, [www.freestaycaribbean.com](http://www.freestaycaribbean.com). The coins were distributed solely to passengers disembarking from cruise ships.

Those receiving the coins could log onto the site to see what values they contained, which ranged from free nights at hotels to car rentals to charter yacht deals. The deals were not necessarily uniquely tied to the coin program, but were easier to find than canvassing the Internet for a bargain. In addition, welcome and thank you signs at the ports referenced the coins, so passengers who might not keep souvenirs might still be intrigued enough by a bargain to visit the Web site and see what they could get.

The trial period lasted one year.

"I think the program is doing well," said Sibilly Hodge. "Passengers off the cruise ships were very excited about receiving the coin and anxious to find out what it was. It's small — passengers can work with it."

Above all, Sibilly Hodge said, "It's attractive, it's different and it's not just another brochure."

## Increasing interest

"We've been at it a year and now there's a lot of interest," said Murrell. But the implementation during that first year was spotty, and tracking the results of the coin program were virtually nonexistent, so recently Tropical brought onboard marketing consultant Len Coster to boost the program to the next level. Coster plans on sharpening the details of

## INCREASE YOUR PROFITS!! OUTSOURCE YOUR WAREHOUSING

- ✓ 30 Years Experience in Bonded & Non-Bonded Warehousing serving Custom Brokers, Freight Forwarders, Importers & Exporters
- ✓ 136,000 sq. ft. Bonded & Non-Bonded Neutral Facility
- ✓ Over 30,000 sq. ft. of executive offices available
- ✓ CFS • IBEC • Bonded • G.O. • General Warehousing • C-TRAT Approved
- ✓ Velocity Cross Dock
- ✓ Order Fulfillment
- ✓ Extensive Inventory Control System - Online Releases
- ✓ Bar Code Scanning
- ✓ 24 Hr Digital Video Recording



2801 N.W. 74th Avenue Suite 100  
Miami, Florida 33122  
3 minutes from Miami International Airport

Contact: Gary Goldfarb - Executive Director  
Tel: 305-594-7484 Fax: 305-594-5848  
E-mail: [ggoldfarb@wtdc.com](mailto:ggoldfarb@wtdc.com)

For additional details visit our website at [www.wtdc.com](http://www.wtdc.com)

the campaign and bringing it to the point where the islands can take over its implementation.

"Tropical's role is to be the catalyst in this program, not to run it," he said. "This really is a marketing project and we are just out there harnessing resources." Because all of the elements are in place for the campaign to take off — an innovative approach, low cost, warm reception from tourism-related industries on the islands — Coster anticipates that "it's not a question of whether or not other islands will sign onto the program — it's more of a matter of when and where."

## Covering the Caribbean

Tropical hopes to have the St. Maarten campaign in place in October and has been traveling to the other islands in the region to stimulate further interest.

In mid-September, Coster reported back from St. Lucia that "things are going great. We had a meeting and had all the key players there, government (tourism and ports) as well as the St. Lucia hotel and tourism group and tour operators that we hope will be an integral part of the plan.

The program was greeted with great enthusiasm and support. I stayed over to finalize the plans, distribution of the coins, tour operator guidance, placement of the welcoming sign, local management of the process and discussions regarding the expansion of the [www.freestaycaribbean.com](http://www.freestaycaribbean.com) Web site. Some ideas surfaced about linking to the

Caribbean Hotel Association Web site and their booking engine, which may enhance the product."

"All of the islands I've talked to are behind it," Coster said. But Coster also noted that while many of the Caribbean islands were "very high on enthusiasm," they were "not very high on follow-through."

So Coster's job is to get the tools in place to enable implementation of the program, to revamp the Web site to allow the tracking of hits, to ensure that the proper means and tools of distributing the coins are in place, and to provide each port with signs bearing a repeat message so that visitors become familiar with the program. "We want to create some value and not have to compete with people handing out things at the side of the road," said Coster. "We're getting everyone to properly organize and give coins to the right people — those taking tours, not just walkabouts." Coster explained that people who've signed on for tours show they're interested in the island and that they'll spend money. "We're trying to lead people to the opportunities," he said.

## Great support

Murrell said the "Come back to the Caribbean" project has received great support by the Florida-Caribbean Cruise Association as well as hotels and ports in participating islands. Even the islands' tourism ministry staff has welcomed the campaign.



*Only 30 percent of cruise passengers will take a repeat cruise in the three years following their cruise. That leaves 70 percent who'll need ideas about what to do with their future vacation plans.*

The staff doesn't view distributing the coins as extra work, Sibilly Hodge said. In fact, her staff wanted to know if they could give the coins to others besides those disembarking from cruise ships.

Tropical has produced more than 200,000 coins to date. "Hotels in the Caribbean are running on 60 percent occupancy rates on average on an annual basis," said Murrell. "I don't think that's bad, I think it's good. There lies a huge opportunity."

Both Sibilly Hodge and Murrell have noticed a slight uptick in their respective businesses over the past six months, but whether the coin program has anything to do with it is anyone's guess. However, "it's a win-win program," said Murrell.

Sibilly Hodge agreed: "Once again, Tropical Shipping has contributed to the islands."