

Published: March 27, 2007

Business: Transportation

Airport aims ads at collar counties

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ROCKFORD — The parking lots at Chicago/Rockford International Airport are filling up, but not with cars from the Chicago suburbs.

Less than 10 percent of passengers last year came from the suburbs, despite rapid growth that gets closer to Rockford every day.

But airport officials see that area as “the low-hanging fruit” and send more marketing there than anywhere else. This year, half of their marketing budget goes to newspaper, cable television, radio, billboard and other advertising in McHenry, Kane, DeKalb and Kendall counties.

“We feel a lot of untapped potential in that area,” said Denise Delanty, the airport’s marketing director. “By this year, maybe focusing on those four counties and looking at the media that’s going to reach those counties the best, I think we’ll see more results than we have in the past.”

About a quarter of the marketing budget will go to television advertising trumpeting the Rockland easier alternative to “that other big-city airport.” Most of the rest is split among newspaper, billboard, e-mail and radio advertising playing up the destinations Rockford serves directly and indirectly.

The plan also targets southern Wisconsin and, to a lesser extent, western Illinois and eastern Iowa.

While O’Hare International Airport’s fares can be at least \$40 to \$80 cheaper, Rockford airport officials say their free parking saves travelers \$9 to \$30 a day, and the easier time getting through the airport saves headaches. Also, Rockford’s routes to Florida can often be comparable to O’Hare’s because of low-cost carrier Allegiant Air. Fares from Rockford are also typically similar to Milwaukee’s for travelers who plan ahead.

But because cash is king, Rockford’s marketing plan also includes periodic discount offers through its Miles-Ahead e-marketing program.

The overall marketing budget is down from last year, but that’s because there are no new routes to promote. If a new route is announced this year, officials will consider adding to the budget.

Between 36 percent and 52 percent of passengers come from the Rockford area, depending on the route, according to airport data. Another 13 percent to 22 percent come from the Madison region, which is closer to the Rockford airport than Milwaukee’s. Only 6 percent or 7 percent come from the Chicago area, but there are signs that number is growing.

“We’re getting some people to begin to make the move,” said Dick Doherty, owner of Crystal Lake Travel Agency. “In this day and age, clients enjoy the smallness of regional airports like Rockford. It’s just more user-friendly.”

He’s noticed the increased advertising and thinks it’ll have a good long-term effect. But he said real growth won’t happen until there are more flights a day and more destinations. It’s still easier to send someone through O’Hare because of multiple options, he said.

The airport also has to battle perceptions that its airlines are fly-by-night operations, said Dave Seng, manager of Family Travel in South Elgin. He’s seen too many clients’ travel plans scrapped by the quick demise of airlines serving Rockford, such as TransMeridian and Hooters.

“We’ve been shying away from the airport, to be honest to you,” he said. “Once bitten, twice shy.”

Still, Seng sees potential: “If we can get some airlines to stay consistent there, there’s huge

demand from folks in this area. They'd love to fly from Rockford."

Seng said the success of Apple Vacations' charters to Cancun and Allegiant Air's service to Florida and Las Vegas might make him take a second look someday. "We've got high hopes," he said.

It's been more than a year since an airline left Rockford. The three existing airlines have each been here more than a year.

When the plan was brought before the Greater Rockford Airport Authority last month, there was some question whether it was worth it since planes were already mostly full.

But Executive Director Bob O'Brien said the goal is to keep the airport in people's minds so that, when a new service starts, it will see instant results. He said the airport doesn't have the luxury of waiting until then to "tell its story."

Rockford-area residents still will see plenty of advertising this year, Delanty said, but they already use the airport at a greater rate than people elsewhere.

"There's still people in the Rockford community that don't know about us," she said, "so we want to reinforce our message to people who would be most likely a target, people living right at our backdoor."

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