

Marketing pros call for clarity in 'Brand Phuket'

By Steven Layne

THE Greater Phuket chapter of the American Chamber of Commerce (AMCHAM) last Wednesday held constructive discussions about the evolution, direction and future of "Brand Phuket".

This year's fourth AMCHAM meeting, held at the Anantara Resort in Mai Khao, featured talks about the island's brand fueled by inspirational presentations from marketing communications expert David Johnson and brand guru David Keen.

Also in attendance were dozens of hospitality and property industry representatives, in addition to public relations, marketing and media practitioners from Phuket, Bangkok and the Asian region.

The evening's intellectual *hors d'oeuvres* were dished out by Managing Director of C9 Hotelworks, Bill Barnett, who set the stage with his signature rhetoric.

"Can Brand Phuket stand out from Brand Thailand – are the two intrinsically involved, or is Brand Phuket its own vehicle?" he asked.

"There's lots of controversy that Phuket is going to be run over by mass tourism, creating a difficult situation for many of us here. Though we want to welcome prosperity, at the same time this is our home..."

Following Bill's stimulating introduction, David Johnson, Managing Director of Bangkok-based consultancy Delivering Asia, proceeded with his presentation about media and communications management.

Mr Johnson stressed the importance of creating, disseminating and monitoring clear and consistent key messages, using both traditional and new media landscapes, in order to build and maintain the island's brand.

"With so many voices that all have different agendas, it's really important that we strive toward a collective marketing approach – that we are all singing from the same hymn book," he said.

Noting that the world now lives in an age of continuously evolving communications in which news – bad and good – travels instantaneously, Mr Johnson outlined some effective media management approaches.

One of his suggestions involved seeking brand partnerships with respected, reliable and authoritative content brands, such as National Geographic and Lonely Planet.

He pointed out effectiveness in creating engaging narration or "local stories" that feature local faces and homegrown brand ambassadors. With this approach, he argues, you can position the brand to actively target specific segments of the market.

A key point of his speech ad-

ressed the need to have a media strategy that aimed to "influence" the market by fostering reciprocal dialogues that "start or change the conversation".

He argued that the traditional strategy of employing "persuasion" – common to television, newspapers and magazines – is no longer enough because it is linear, while today's audiences require active engagement.

"In promoting destination brands, social media is one channel that cannot be ignored," he continued.

"Channels such as Facebook, Twitter and Youtube are invaluable tools for launching innovative viral campaigns that can communicate the intended key messages and create 'brand buzz', getting people to talk about Phuket with the right positioning," he said.

Building on the themes of consistency and uniformity, Quo Global CEO David Keen posed some very important questions to Phuket's players and promoters.

Declining to use the microphone, Mr Keen was heard loud and clear across the conference room in what was a thought-provoking and entertaining speech.

He questioned whether Brand Phuket should continue to be formed and dictated by market forces (demand) as has been the case since the destination emerged in the mid 1970s, or if it was now time for a change.

Mr Keen was keen to suggest that it is indeed time for Phuket to develop a unified strategy that aims to develop and drive the brand and the market – not the other way around.

After pitching various examples of effective strategies employed by other destination brands such as Bali, Pattaya and Bhutan, he went on to emphasize necessary steps that Brand Phuket must accomplish in order to prosper.

'It's better to build on what you have. Phuket is already a well known brand around the world ...'

– David Johnson



GIFTED: (From left), Phuket Gazette publisher John Magee, MD of Delivering Asia David Johnson, CEO of Quo Global and MD of C9 Hotelworks Bill Barnett at the latest AMCHAM meeting.

"First, Phuket needs to harness its attributes and culture – which do exist, even though they are mostly unknown and untold," he said.

Offering various tourism and market segment figures, Mr Keen stressed, "Instead of focusing on the numbers alone, it is important to address whether the numbers are sustainable," he said.

As for market segmentation, Mr Keen argued that the upper end of the middle income bracket is one segment that particularly deserves more attention.

"We shouldn't just focus on the high-end because they spend a lot. . . the greatest opportunity in Phuket lies in the higher end of the middle income bracket as this is the widest segment and supplies the largest numbers of visitors to the island," he said.

At the core of his speech was a very simple, yet surprisingly difficult-to-answer question: What is Phuket?

Asked to 10 different islanders, such a question is likely to return 10 different answers, he said.

Though failing to offer an answer of his own, Mr Keen's point was nonetheless clear: It is impossible to promote, sell or market that which you have not yet defined.

Following the presentations was a session of networking drinks, courtesy of the resort, which Bill Barnett was keen to point out is owned by one of Thailand's wealthiest men, Minor Corp CEO Bill Heinecke.

The informal mingling provided an ample opportunity for the *Phuket Gazette* to speak exclusively with both Davids.

Delving beyond Phuket, David Keen told the *Gazette* that he doesn't fully agree with the move to promote 'Brand Andaman', as appears to be a strategy of the current government.

"Brand Andaman sounds sexy, but it could be misleading and confusing for the market since the Andaman is a vast sea – and not necessarily a specific destination within Thailand," he said.

David Johnson agreed. "It's better to build on what you have. Phuket is already a well known brand around the world.

"We should develop it fully before we start broadening the scope," he said.