

A Nation of Tribes



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There has been much talk lately around social cohesion and a need for us all to share common values and aspirations. This seems fair enough. But it's also true that our interests, hobbies and obsessions are as diverse as the very country we live in. It is a fundamental part of human nature to want to identify with something and be part of a group that does the same. How else to explain organised religion or political affiliations for example.

The characteristics of groups or tribes who identify with each other in one way or another tend to be easily observed but often misunderstood. It seems to me that businesses, including accommodation providers, would do well to understand the needs and wants of our distinct social groups and be ready to offer an experience to suit. Of course, some tribes are best avoided. The managing director and her cohort call themselves the Girl Tribe. Based on casual observation I believe this particular tribe is descended from an Amazonian group of female head-hunters whose rituals and customs are designed to scare the living daylight out of any man foolish enough to challenge them. I fear even this vague reference to them will cause an ill wind to blow my way, but I digress.

There's a little coastal town in northern NSW which provides an interesting study in tribal activity. To me it's always been an enigma. I love order, neatness and adherence to social norms. I should hate Byron Bay, but I don't. It's been doing my head in, man. The MD and I recently stayed in Byron and I had the lightbulb moment. It's still a hippie kinda place full of fit young suntanned persons who appear to live a life of leisure. For that I hate them of course!

Here's the thing though. Byron is also a place where the tribes of the seriously rich get about in bare feet, harem pants and tied dye t-shirts while swigging Dom Perignon out of a paper bag. This cohort looks back with fondness on their youth as a time of dropping out, no cares, cool music and few responsibilities. Now they've got money, so while they might look and act like beach bums, they can afford some seriously up market accommodation. Byron is that niche market where those with no dough create a vibe that attracts those who can afford the finer things in life. The boutique accommodation operators in the area know this and appear to do very well as a result.

A few weeks after our Byron visit, we attended a regional event for which the MD had been most looking forward to. I speak of course of Rockynats, the 3-day rev head fest that takes place annually in the regional Queensland city of Rockhampton. To say this event attracts a different tribe to Byron would be to wildly understate the obvious. The event is the biggest car and bike festival in Queensland and a serious money spinner for the city. All accommodation is booked out well in advance, with tariffs reflecting the level of demand. The MD could barely contain her excitement at the prospect of burnouts, street drags, mullet and tattoo competitions and much more.

In fact, she was so enthusiastic she barely left our unit all weekend. The fact that she could observe the street parade and drifting from the balcony while throwing back a wine or two seemed to brighten her mood considerably.

What accommodation providers in Rocky know is how much we love our modified cars. To that end they take great care to advertise safe and secure parking, driveways with easy access and options for people towing car trailers. They also know that these mainly working-class people who sometimes look a bit wild are generally exceptionally well behaved, well mannered and appreciative of the service they receive. The modified car tribe could easily be dismissed by those who judge. To do so in business would be a distinct error.

There are of course countless other tribes and subgroups therein. Accommodation providers will never be able to appeal to them all but playing to your strengths in terms of property type, amenity and location seems like a good idea. On the other hand, being openly hostile to any particular group would seem like poor management to say the least. I've been involved in various sports and hobbies for a good part of my life and I'm still amazed that special interest and sporting events are not always embraced by the very businesses who benefit from them.

To me the special interest guest is gold in terms of future marketing opportunities. You know who they are, where they are from and what tribe they belong to. If they are anything like me maybe they belong to multiple tribes. If I'm running a hotel in Melbourne and a guest stays for the Formula 1 Grand Prix, I'm going to note that. Then I'm going to put him on a marketing list and advise him of any upcoming motoring events in Melbourne. I'll even suggest he (or she) brings the whole tribe.

I'll leave you with some life advice. It is 1040 km from Noosa to Rockhampton and back. Under no circumstances should the journey be attempted in a very low rough riding Holden Monaro, via the potholed joke that is our National highway and with an increasingly perturbed navigator on board. A two-door coupe is a very small space when occupied by a defensive man and an unhappy MD.

That's it from me. I'm off to put 50psi in my tyres and remove my roof racks. Dead set, you couldn't make this stuff up. I suspect the tribes are getting restless.

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