Oprah shows have created a buzz about Australia, just not holiday bookings

- By Claire Harvey
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Travel agents are waiting to see if Oprah's Australian TV special has an impact on tourism numbers. Picture: AFP
Source: Herald Sun

- US travel agents say show publicity hasn't paid off
- Excitement of Australian hasn't generated bookings
- Agents warned not to mention 'O' word in marketing

FINALLY, Tourism Australia has figured out how to make a splash in America - but now the real work starts.

That's the verdict from US-based travel agents after this week's American screenings of Oprah's Ultimate Australian Adventure specials.

The shows, made with $5 million of Australian taxpayers' money, created enormous buzz in their 4pm timeslots in the US this week.

Tourism Australia is keen to claim its investment is already yielding rewards, but agents say the excitement has so far not transformed into concrete bookings.

TA also warns agents to avoid mentioning Oprah by name in their marketing.

Winfrey's production company, Harpo, fiercely guards the trademark Oprah, so travel agents must be careful not to use the daytime diva's name in promotions as they seek to capitalise on the show's publicity.

"The Oprah shows are creating big publicity, but they will not close the deal," veteran travel agent Andrew Haffenden of US-based agency Australian Natural Adventures said.

"What Tourism Australia and (agents) need to start doing now is make this a call to action - this is an opportunity to put Australia up front again."

Other specialist Australian agents in the US were cautious, remembering TA's previous unsuccessful forays, including the 2006 "Where the bloody hell are you?" campaign and Baz Luhrmann's stylish, but largely overlooked "Come Walkabout" ads of 2008.

"I know my bookings have gone up, but I'm not sure if it's because of Oprah or not," said southern California agent Linda Kahn-Ferrall of Robinson Travel Service, who specialises in selling Australian holidays.

"I'm figuring we might not get more calls until next week and people start checking on websites and really making plans."

Viewer numbers for the shows will not be available for a fortnight, as the show was syndicated into America's hundreds of diverse television markets, according to the Neilsen ratings agency.

The power of Oprah is undeniable: she has earned billions through television, publishing and endorsement work and has just launched her own cable-television network.

One measure is donations to the Queensland Premier's flood appeal, which has increased by $25 million to a total of nearly $128m since Oprah publicised the appeal on her program and website on Tuesday.

When it comes to tourism, however, Oprah's endorsement does not always equal financial success. Winfrey promoted Baz Luhrmann's 2008 film Australia, but the film, which was accompanied by a $40m Tourism Australia ad campaign, had only average takings at US box offices and failed to generate a tourist boom.

US-based tourism operators reported hundreds more visits to their websites during the airing of the specials, while traffic had nearly doubled to Tourism Australia's own website Australia.com, Tourism Australia's marketing general manager Nick Baker said.

"We also had 300 [travel] agents in the US sign up to be 'Aussie Specialists' during the weeks leading up to the airing of the shows," Mr Baker said, adding many Americans had called local
agents ready to book tickets with no questions asked. "They didn't need to be convinced, they'd seen the show," Mr Baker said.

American radio, television and print media are jammed with advertisements from Tourism Australia, Qantas and private travel agencies following the shows but agents and experts report the excitement has not yet converted into dollars.

The TV shows were great television and the best of post-modern tourism marketing, with product placement, celebrity endorsement and gut-wrenching human stories, said travel expert Rich Harrill, director of the International Tourism Research Institute and Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Travel & Tourism Industry Center at the University of South Carolina.

But that does not necessarily mean tourist dollars, Dr Harrill said.

"You have to market to the person who is most likely to come. Are [Oprah's audience members] the kind of people who will get on the plane and go to Australia, or do they just want to go to the beach here in the US?" said Dr Harrill. "That's what I'd like to know and we may never find out, unless Tourism Australia asks those questions."