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Did you know that the French are credited for being the first to establish Cancun and Punta Cana as global resort destinations in the late 1970s?

That was one of several insights from a recent presentation by **Laura Hendel** on the renewed **#brand** and **#marketing** strategy of **Club Med**. Thanks to **Kai Haasler, MBA** and **AAGEF Ontario** for hosting us at **Centre for Social Innovation (CSI)** earlier this week.

The presentation offered a useful marketing case study on how a legacy brand can evolve to remain relevant while preserving its original values. In this case, it leveraged **#innovation** and bold strategic choices rather than following industry trends.

The story begins in 1950 with a simple idea: an all-inclusive vacation built around sports and community, initially set in Mallorca, in a low-key colony of tents made from U.S. Army surplus. From there, the brand helped shape post-war mass tourism, pioneering concepts that are now industry standards, such as buffet dining (1965) and the Mini Club (1967).

In the following decades, the history of the company reflected the challenges faced by many global brands: ambitious expansion plans, rising competition, and periods where the brand struggled to stay current. Instead of competing on price, the company chose a deliberate shift toward a more premium positioning in the early 2000s.

What hasn't changed:
- A focus on shared experiences and conviviality.
- The importance of sports and active lifestyles.
- A strong emphasis on people, both guests and staff.

What has evolved:
- From budget-friendly "villages" to upgraded resorts.
- From Mediterranean roots to a global footprint, with growth in Asia and Latin America.
- From a social-club feel to a multi-segment audience (families, couples, friends, and solo travellers).
- From intuition-led operations to increasingly AI-supported customer journeys.

These adjustments are reflected in several strategic choices, such as developing mountain resorts as an area of growth in a more local, post-COVID context, or prioritizing emotional intelligence over pure hospitality experience in hiring.

The Canadian market offers a useful illustration of this tension. Active since 1978, it is now accelerating, with the opening of a Toronto store in 2023 to support a more direct, experience-driven sales approach. Travel patterns also differ by region: Quebec tends to favour proximity, with Charlevoix or the Caribbean islands, while Ontario shows greater interest in more remote destinations like Bali and Japan. Looking ahead, the opening of a new resort in Mont-Tremblant in 2028 signals continued confidence in the market.

With business volume exceeding €2.2 billion in 2025, up 4% from 2024, the chain aims to reach 100 premium resorts by 2035. How successfully can a brand continue to navigate this delicate balance with growth, technology, and evolving customer expectations while remaining faithful to its original vision? Time will tell.

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How do you reinvent a brand when everyone has copied you?

That was the question explored yesterday by Laura Hendel at the **AAGEF Ontario** event, through the transformation of **Club Med**.
After inventing the all-inclusive model in 1950 and the Mini Club childcare program in 1967, Club Med faced a classic challenge: what was once distinctive became commoditized. Competitors caught up. Price became harder to justify.

Their response wasn't to compete down. It was to move up.
• Repositioned the brand upmarket starting in 2004
• Reduced complexity (from ~100 to ~60 resorts) to focus investment
• Built a premium tiers: the Exclusive Collection
• Elevated the experience across location, service, and activities
The result: a clearer value proposition — and a brand that stands for something again.

What was also interesting is the Canadian angle: from early adoption in Québec from 1978 with the opening of the Cancun and Punta Cana resorts to a renewed push into English-speaking Canada with a Toronto presence since 2023, and continued expansion with a new resort planned in Mont-Tremblant.

My takeaway:
When your category catches up, incremental differentiation is rarely enough.
You either dilute… or you sharpen your positioning and double down on what makes you truly distinctive.

Curious how others see this:
In mature categories, is trading up still the most effective path to sustainable differentiation?