

Communities Should Team Up to Boost Tourism

by Jeff Coy, ISHC

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Small town officials wonder how they can grow their local economies with tourism. They see what happened in Branson MO, Frankenmuth MI, Galena IL and Stillwater MN, and their eyes light up with visions of sugar plums. They see other cities and towns attracting thousands of annual visitors who spend "clean" tourism dollars in the local economy, and they want to know how they can do it. It is true, some small towns have achieved tremendous economic growth through tourism development and promotion --- while others have floundered in their attempts.

"How can we get our fair share of the tourism dollar?," local officials ask.

Whose job is it to grow your local economy through tourism?

Here's what I tell them:

Market your destination the same way you market any other product. Find out what kind of people like to visit your area and why they come. Determine what your community is doing right to satisfy visitor needs and wants, and do more of it. Focus on delivering a "feel good" experience and complete visitor satisfaction. Show visitors how much you appreciate them and they will tell many others.

Of course, this requires an organized effort to sensitize local residents to the needs of visitors. To grow your local economy through tourism development and promotion requires that everyone work together toward a unified vision of the future.

Sounds easy --- but because of fragmentation, it isn't.

You've got a lot of different entities involved: a state office of tourism, city

council, chamber of commerce, convention & visitors bureau, hotels, airlines, car rentals, attractions, sports facilities, museums, restaurants and retailers. Everybody has a particular interest and represents a small piece of a big industry.

First, whose job is it to grow your local economy through tourism? Sometimes, it's a visionary mayor or director of economic development or a business owner. It definitely takes a leader to step forward and be a champion for the cause.

Second, who can best pull this effort together? Often, it takes an independent consultant --- someone skilled in research and facilitating the participative process --- to help build consensus among all the interested people who make up the tourism team in your community.

With a local tourism champion, a supportive team and a hospitality consultant working together, small cities and towns throughout America can get their fair share of the tourism market.

Here's a five point checklist to help guide you through the process.

- Conduct a visitor study
- Take inventory of your existing attractions
- Position your attractiveness among other cities
- Develop a destination marketing plan
- Promote your city as a product that delivers a feel-good experience

1. CONDUCT A VISITOR DEMAND STUDY

Who is traveling to your city or town? Describe visitors in terms of their demographics: age, family type, income, education level.

What are the visitor segments and their needs? Determine what type of trips they engage in --- business, meeting or convention, outdoor recreation, sightseeing, entertainment, shopping, medical or visiting friends and relatives. The purpose of their trip and their motivation to travel can be clues to their specific needs.

What is their attitude about places traveled to and through?

Where do visitors come from? Review the geographic factors: visitor origin, purpose of trip, visitor behavior, modes of transportation, length of trips, size of travel party.

When do visitors come to your area? Review seasonal factors: peak months, weekdays versus weekends, low periods.

Why do visitors visit your area? Make a list of the values and lifestyle factors such as reason for travel, vacation or getaway factors and social reasons for trip activities and behavior

Ask area visitors if they would spend more time in your city or town at the expense of visiting other places? Ask those not planning to visit your city whether they would visit if you added new attractions, facilities, events and services?

2. INVENTORY YOUR EXISTING TOURISM ATTRACTIONS

What is the primary reason people visit your city? What are the major generators of visitors? List all the things to see and do in your area. Survey tourism suppliers (restaurants, transportation attractions and retailers) for information about number of visitors, visitor origin, length of stay, months visited, why they visited, dollars visitors spent, demographics, profiles of each visitor segment and definitions of visitor needs versus product offerings

3. POSITION YOUR CITY'S ATTRACTIONS AMONG COMPETITOR CITIES.

Take inventory of competing cities' supply of tourism attractions, facilities, events and services. What visitor segments do they attract? What are your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats?

4. DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT A DESTINATION MARKETING PLAN

Identify different visitor segments you want to target and determine specific benefits, appeals and incentives for each.

Match the resources of your city to the needs of each visitor segment based on the size of each segment, the spending potential, your city's ability to influence the travel decisions and to satisfy the needs of each segment.

Write a destination marketing plan to promote your city and an economic growth plan that provides capital funding to construct new attractions, facilities, events and services and improve existing ones.

Assign your city's tourism development and promotion responsibilities and budgets.

Determine lodging tax formula and proper use of funds.

Hire an expert to do a market study on the economic feasibility of proposed tourism development projects.

5. PROMOTE YOUR CITY AS ONE THAT DELIVERS A FEEL-GOOD EXPERIENCE.

Coordinate the management of all private and public tourism organizations.

Get regional and local citizen support of your tourism promotion efforts.

People buy travel destinations for the same reasons they buy other products: they want to experience pleasure, satisfaction and reward.

Jeff Coy, ISHC, is president of JLC Marketing Associates, a hospitality research & consulting firm with offices in Rochester MN, Phoenix AZ and Singapore. He is certified by the International Society of Hospitality Consultants. Contact jeffcoy@aol.com or 507 289-7404 in the USA or 65 735-1886 in Singapore.