



Approaching Tourism as Economic Development

Every community in the United States has a story to tell - a story that is unique to the specific area. It begins with the heritage of the people who settled and the landscape they found, plus the heritage of any Native Americans who were residing in the area before European settlement. Culture is what has evolved since. Since there are no two exact combinations of heritage and landscape, it is likely this uniqueness is what makes a destination, a destination. This approach provides every small town, small city, rural community, and rural county, with the ability to feature itself as a unique place to explore. Since economic development is the process of creating strong, adaptive economies that build upon and strengthen the unique qualities already present in a region, even though tourism resources vary from place to place, they still work to contribute to the economy in every location.

In fact, tourism is the most efficient economic development a community can generate. Visitors travel to an area and spend time and money, without requiring the community to build new schools, deliver new services, or spend tax money to serve new residents. When visitors have an enjoyable time, they do the region's marketing for them, returning home to tell family and friends about the great time they had. This word-of-mouth advertising becomes the most effective type of advertising available. When they leave a positive review online, the word spreads even faster.

Leaving The Past Behind

At the start of the process to increase tourism, many localities find they first have to work to overcome the past. Perceptions about lost industries that once powered their economies can become a psychological barrier to moving ahead. Community leaders not familiar with the economic development available from tourism may

assume that no amount of effort to bring back prosperity will succeed without the industries with which so many residents identified and made their living from. It is important to make sure these perspectives do not taint new efforts or promote the assumption that tourism will not be successful from the outset.

Fortunately continued good news from the 81% of American travelers who contemplate taking a trip to a small town, mountain, or remote area in the next 18 months, can change some attitudes.. Plus, recent research by Travel Oregon points out that visitors who enjoy exploring heritage and culture in non-metro areas spend as much as \$2,495 per trip. That's a considerable amount of economic impact to be generated.

Eliminate Stereotypes of Visitors

After leaving the past behind, communities looking to attract today's visitors have to eliminate all the stereotypes about who visitors are, and what they do, that may have built up in the community over the years.

In some locations, visitors are still viewed as "tourists," believing that they are looking only for lowest price and only visit "touristy" places. Even though there may still be buses carrying group tours that fall into this category, nothing could be further from the truth about most of today's visitors. Arriving in their own automobiles, they are seeking experiences, with cost not their most important priority. Today's visitors want to be engaged and immersed in the destination. Just over 70% of Millennials pride themselves on seeking travel experiences their family and friends have never heard of.

Many Boomers, now retired or semi-retired, are opting for more exploration and staying longer during off-peak periods when there are fewer other people around. Many have also already explored all the traditional destinations, sometimes several times, so seeking out new places is a natural progression. Roughly 40% of family trips now include at least two generations, the same visitors who more often stay in vacation rentals and other private accommodations, a practice that laptop luggers have extended to stays complete with the comforts of home and a place to prepare meals.

Eliminate Stereotypes of Tourism in Non-Metro Areas

Next, since we learned in earlier material that non-metro areas are not stereotypical regions filled only with farming, ranching, and poor communities, it is important not to stereotype tourism in these areas either. It is not just farm-based tourism, nor only outdoor recreation tourism or heritage tourism. Tourism in non-metro areas encompasses all three:

Heritage Tourism

Also referred to as cultural heritage tourism when the arts are included, places emphasis on understanding how residents lived and live, plus learning their history and heritage, through experiencing places, activities and artifacts that represent the past or a connection to the past;

Nature-Based Tourism

Also called outdoor recreation tourism, nature-based tourism includes leisure travel with the purpose of enjoying scenery, natural areas, and wildlife through observation, or active pursuits such as hiking and biking;

Agritourism

In farm-based tourism, visitors participate in any of a wide variety of activities on the farm and those with some type of affiliation or involvement with a farm.

In new of this variety, tourism in non-metro areas can be better defined as experiences that occur in less populated areas, encompass a wide range of attractions and activities, that emphasize the area's special features and attractions, involve smaller scale in terms of buildings and the size of communities, grown organically by local residents, and developed and controlled locally for the long-term sustainability of the area. This definition gives every community the ability to declare itself a destination, distinctive from other areas.

Eliminate Stereotypes of the Area

Further, any location looking to expand tourism must also get past existing stereotypes about what is worthwhile to promote to visitors as well. Comprehensive inventories, realistic capacity assessments and a critical look at existing barriers to increasing tourism, many of which may not be well-known because they have been in place for so long will all aid in creating a strong program.

It is important to document the barriers and work through them diligently and quietly, one at a time, to remove their impact on increasing the visitor population as much as possible. This won't happen overnight, but it will be worth it in the increased level of economic development that can be delivered to the region.

The question becomes, how do communities work to deliver economic development to their residents within the constraints of limited visitor services capacity and other barriers? With more creativity to work through the constraints than may have to be applied to other locations.

The other major question is what is a workable sequence of actions that will take tourism from one level to the next within a stable and viable visitor economy, without suffering degradation to the natural environment and tempering the ups and downs of economic cycles? These are the questions that economic development organizations across the nation are working to answer.

At critical points, it is also important to engage the community to present all the conclusions of assessments to get their opinions. Once people understand that the result will be an increase in local revenues and the ability to have better or increased community services, plus an increase in business for local small businesses, most generally understand that increased tourism is going to be a good thing for their communities. Some will change their minds when they see good results. Others will stay in the anti-more visitor camp and there is not a lot that can be done with that group except respect their opinion and move on.

Embrace a Practical Hands on Process

After beginning to view themselves as destination many non-metro areas have discovered that establishing and promoting a more off the beaten path location requires a very different approach and skill set than tourism development in more populated regions. In smaller communities it cannot be approached with grand strategies, complicated economic equations, unfeasible actions, or clinical processes

that result in complex plans filled with lists of goals. The numbers to put into these equations simply don't add up. Besides, many of these elaborate plans just get put on a shelf, only to be revisited three years later, refreshed, and returned to the shelf, with the assumption that everyone involved is now making their decisions based on these plans. That just doesn't happen automatically.

Inventory

Every community needs to know what it has, how many and who current visitors are, and capacity it has to serve increased visitors. Thoroughness is key.

The foundation of the entire process is a fresh look at the attractions, resources, and assets the area has available to utilize and promote. In addition to interesting places to visit, overnight visitors require access to the same types of services they have at their home location. A place to stay, places to eat, places to shop for what they might need or want, the availability of health care should these needs arise, automobile service stations and car repair services, should that need arise, plus the availability of a bank and ATM.

Start with a clean slate and a fresh set of eyes and put down EVERY location within a 30-mile radius that can contribute to visitor experiences, since visitors will travel as far as 30 miles from a home base community to explore or engage in activities they are interested in. Research completed in an area that has not previously created a comprehensive inventory most often reveals non-metro areas replete with attractions located within an accessible radius for today's visitors. These resources are often also connected by scenic byways, heritage corridors, and historic trails that serve as economic drivers in their own right, yet have never been

assembled into a comprehensive portfolio. This is especially true in areas where significant attractions are paired with very limited accommodations capacity, fewer dining options, and general lack of specialty retail. As a result, many good opportunities get overlooked.

Analyzing the available resources and assets will ultimately also point to new, as yet untapped opportunities. When available resources and assets are compared with the needs of existing visitors, they can also be assessed as to how they can be employed to attract new visitor markets.

If, like so many smaller communities, the region has concentrated initial tourism efforts on outdoor recreation, a look at the cultural and heritage aspects of the destination will point out which of these resources can attract visitors whose spending patterns are completely different than outdoor recreation visitors. In addition, a more refined assessment of outdoor recreation niches can also yield new target markets, such as more generic hikers in addition to mountain climbers, cross-country skiers in addition to or in place of traditional skiers, and mountain bikers who are always seeking new places to ride, in addition to pleasure drivers who love scenic routes.

Also knowing what competing destinations are doing and experiencing their offerings first-hand supports the ability to position a destination as unique within the competition.

Create New Tourism Offerings

A complete portfolio of attractions, resources, and assets paves the way to develop new tourism products, such as thematic trails that feature related resources to create that new offerings. Pre-designed experiences that spell out what visitors can see and do in an easily accessible format, make it easier for potential visitors to select your area for their next visit. That approach takes the guess work out of visitors having to judge for themselves what is good and what is not.

Engage in Robust Marketing and Promotion

Formalizing marketing efforts to increase tourism into a plan should focus on delivering maximum economic impact without denigrating the community.

We're well past the era when a destination can say, "We have something for everyone." Today's visitors expect to be shown what you have and how it relates to their experience priorities. Careful planning for messaging and promotion across multiple channels is the most effective approach, especially for locations with limited financial resources to execute the plan. Spreading messages across more social media platforms rather than fewer can greatly expand market reach.

Automate it so it's not that much more work.

Manage Carefully

All plans must be managed carefully to achieve the goals of the organization while staying within limited budgets. Precisely managing operations keeps everyone focused. Part of managing the effort includes communicating the economic benefits of increased tourism to the powers that be and delivering the message that tourism supports a higher quality of life in the community. A voice at the table where

community officials plan changes that affect visitor enjoyment will further expand the influence of the tourism efforts.

Employ Agile Strategic Planning

Using agile strategic planning that spells out monthly, quarterly, and yearly goals to achieve the plan is an excellent guide to keeping things moving forward toward success. Measurement and analysis of program components illustrates what should be changed to increase effectiveness. A constant eye on revenues and expenses leads to good fiscal responsibility. Community engagement enables recognition that tourism is in fact contributing to the well-being of the community while at the same time delivering increased economic impact. Within a well-implemented effort to increase tourism, everyone wins.