

Communities should team up to boost tourism

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 vision of sugar plums. They see other cities attracting thousands of annual visitors who spend “clean” tourism dollars in the local economy, and they want to know how they can do it. How we get our fair share of the tourism dollar?” local officials ask.

Here’s what I tell them.

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

Of course, this requires an organized effort to sensitize local residents to the needs of visitors. To grow your local economy through tourism 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-rental outlets, attractions, sports facilities, museums, restaurants and retailers. Each has a particular interest and is 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, a 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 put 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 the 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.

1. Conduct a visitor demand study.

Who is traveling to your city or town? Describe visitors in terms of their demographics: age, family types, annual income, and 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 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 trip and size of travel party.

Why do visitors visit your area? Make a list of values and lifestyle factors such as reason for travel, 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. Take inventory of your existing visitor attractions.

What is the primary reason people visit your city? What are the major generators of visitors? List all the things to see and in your area.

Survey tourism suppliers (restaurants, transportation, attractions and retailers) for information about number of visitors, visitor origin, length of stay, month visited, why they visited, dollars visitors spent, demographics, profiles of each visitor

segment and definitions of visitor needs vs product offerings.

3. Position your city’s attractions among competing cities and towns.

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 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 feasibility of the proposed tourism development projects.

5. Promote your city as one that delivers a feel-good experience.

Coordinate the efforts 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.

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