



PARTNERING

To Make Your Locale a Tourist Destination

Joining forces with others in your community to plan a marketing strategy to attract more visitors to your area is a savvy business move. Here are examples of how well cooperative efforts can work.

BY ELEANOR M. WILSON

When you can't do it alone, ask for help. Amidst the turmoil in the hospitality world, this sound advice has been resurrected and applied to some very creative marketing plans. Progressive companies are exploring the cooperative theme in earnest, using a safety in numbers approach to generate significant returns for the most efficient cash outlay. It stands to reason that several entities working together will carry more clout in the marketplace at considerably less cost.

Perhaps it's time to gather your "village entrepreneurs" together for a think-tank session, and review what you have to offer the visitor. What has worked so far at other venues? There is no shortage of schemes already in progress. Some, of course, are rather elaborate for startups, or may be well beyond your town's abilities to offer. This article examines a few ongoing projects that cover the familiar along with the extremely creative, to give you an idea of what can and is being done.

Finding Your Theme

As you will see, themes can be developed from something that seems mundane because you deal with it on a daily basis. This is where group marketing takes the lead — many heads can be more objective than one.

On-going success stories based on a theme run the gamut from the "k.i.s.s." formula to finely tuned mega-operations. Among the broader themes, Germany's "Romantic Road" or France's "Route de Vin" are two very successful inexpensive endeavors that highlight more than one area. The designers of these now-famous routes analyzed what

...Try, Try Again

As groups experiment to reach the correct formula for unified marketing, it should be pointed out that there is no shame in choosing the wrong course and then changing lanes. The shame is more in not trying at all.

For those in doubt about that theory, does the name Las Vegas ring a bell? This gambling oasis in the desert has reinvented itself more times than we care to count. Probably the most disastrous was a fairly recent attempt to become a family destination.

Las Vegas basked in its own neon glow for many years, unchallenged by other areas. Then came Atlantic City, gambling licenses for Indian reservations plus every kind of watergoing vessel, and eventually casinos on the Internet. Suddenly, Las Vegas was no longer the only game in town. It was time to take stock and regroup.

After several unremarkable reincarnations, the “favorite city” theme idea evolved. It proved to be uncannily appropriate, now that so many U.S. citizens are afraid to fly or to go abroad. If you want to visit Paris, New York, Venice — forget passports and long flights. Just go to Vegas. It’s all there in reproductive glory, sort of an international Disney World. You can even view the prestigious pieces of art in the same town that used to give the Rat Pack free rein.

Las Vegas is to be congratulated for innovation as well as tenacity. When one direction didn’t work, another idea quickly followed. This time, they have hit on a winner, and it’s paying off.

they had to offer, pointed tourists in the right direction, and gave them something interesting to explore along the way.

One prominent example of the more extensive theme developments is Colonial Williamsburg, authenticating a return in time with elaborate costumes, replicas of historic places, re-enactments of lifestyles and battlegrounds.

Mapping the Route

You may be located in an area of lush landscapes and abundant nature, where a “Scenic Drive” would flourish. A reasonable supply of artisans, antique shops, and inns form the makings of a “Backroads Ramble.” Any historic sites or quaint points of interest are helpful, even if you don’t have a waterfall and nostalgic waterwheel.

Whatever your town’s attributes, inspiration for exploiting them may come from the method used on St. Croix. This U.S. Virgin Island wanted to highlight its diverse culture and heritage to give tourists a closer look at what makes it so special. St. Croix also banked on the vacationer’s curiosity about island life.

Spearheaded by an active Landmarks Society, the government tourism department and the private sector joined to form the “Heritage Trail.” Uniquely, this is a route with no beginning or end. A well-designed map numbers interesting sites with corresponding explanatory paragraphs and pictures, allowing trailgoers to cover as much or as little as they desire. Markers, using the island’s trademark sugar mill symbol, direct participants along the route. Besides adding another dimension to tourism, promotion of the trail and its subsequent popularity has aided several local businesses. It can be seen by tour van, taxi, car rental, kayaking in the mangroves, horseback riding through a rain forest, on an environmental cycling tour, or by foot. As visitors explore through one or more of these options, they patronize restaurants, outlying shops and inns...along with the traditional tourist stops at museums, botanical gardens, forts and a rum distillery.

Bermuda’s latest attraction, “The African Diaspora Heritage Trail,” also uses a guidebook and markers. A spokesman for the Bermuda Department

of Tourism announced, “Bermuda developed this trail to identify, conserve and promote historic sites linked with the progress of people of African descent in Bermuda. Research disclosed that there is a growing interest among people of African descent in tracing their roots.”

The Single Theme

St. Croix’s experience — heightening patronage for individual businesses along the trail — could also benefit areas with less diversity, where group promotion focuses on one specific niche as a campaign base. A single theme certainly blossomed into a profitable idea for the town of Charlotte, South Carolina, and its antebellum mansions. And how many people nationwide were aware of the charms of Napa Valley before area wineries joined the tour circuit? The valley has become such a showcase that Robert Mondavi and his friends have opened an elaborate art/garden/restaurant/tasting center right in town, where vineyard visitors usually stay.

Attractions with the same product can make use of the joint effort idea by organizing tours of a city’s gardens or its historic places, architecture, or pottery barns. Art walks have a large following, especially if artists are at work in galleries or their own studios. This could be arranged on a rotating basis, pressing into service only one or two painters, potters or sculptors at a time. All it takes is a map, someone to show visitors around at each stop, maybe some refreshment along the route — and promotion.

Successful themes need not always be glamorous or artistic. The town of York, Pennsylvania, is rich in history dating back to the Continental Army. But why is York now prominent in the minds of tourists and day-trippers? It markets itself as the ‘Factory Tour Capital of the World,’ featuring over 30 factories as proof — and it got there first, an important point in any business strategy.

“Putting that title on York is a big boast,” admitted Dave VanArsdale, chairman of York County’s Convention & Visitors Bureau, “but not an idle one. No other community has claimed the title. We have.”

One fine point worth noting is that factories on the tour are not just listed,

but described in the pamphlet by their claims to fame. Martin's Potato Chips are served on Air Force One, Pfaltzgraff Company is the nation's oldest pottery maker, historic carpets from Family Heirloom Weavers adorn the restored homes of six former presidents, and Harley-Davidson's motorcycle plant — "a world icon of American pride" says VanArsdale — is the county's #1 attraction. There is marketing at its best — that extra draw. The tourist may not have an original interest in weaving, but these carpets were selected by presidents!

Hotel packages are offered along with the free tours, and most factories have retail outlets on premises or close by.

If nothing in your area seems "groupable," there is always the piggy-back approach. Hershey's Chocolate World, Crayola, and C.F. Martin Guitar, all located close to York, promote their tours in conjunction with the Factory Tour Capital. Perhaps your neighboring community is running an appropriate campaign that could benefit your business through tag-on promotion.

It Takes a Village

If there is still any doubt about the value of joining forces, consider the plight of Cooperstown, New York.

"Say Cooperstown, and everyone immediately thinks of the Baseball Hall of Fame," noted Doug Greenberg, senior account representative of Nancy J. Friedman Public Relations, Inc., the firm recruited in 1999 to help other Cooperstown tourist-related entities gain recognition. "The Hall of Fame brought a lot of tourists to this small village, but it definitely overshadowed other wonderful aspects that warranted attention. We committed to correcting that oversight. This is a seasonal destination that was drawing heavily in summer when children were out of school. Our mandate was to extend that influx to the shoulder months.

"We cleared one typical hurdle quickly," Greenberg explained. "Major funding was provided by the Clark Estate and Leatherstocking Foundation, aided by lesser contributions from participating businesses. The Clark Estate is the town benefactor in numerous ways, disbursing

funds generated as heirs to the Singer Sewing Machine fortune.

"We were also fortunate in the type of attractions we could offer. Fenimore Art Museum houses one of the finest collections of American folk art," Greenberg continued. "The Farmer's Museum presents a comprehensive look at America's past rural life, with opportunities for hands-on participation. Adding to the town's pleasures are the very gracious Otesaga Resort and its championship Leatherstocking Golf Course, originally designed in 1909, plus Glimmerglass Opera in its ideal setting on the shores of Lake Otsego.

"Our task was enhanced considerably by outstanding exhibits at the museum, exciting inductions at the Hall of Fame, and quality performances at Glimmerglass Opera that have gained national attention. Also, the names were familiar to anyone who has read native son James Fenimore Cooper's writings. Wrap all this up in the quaint rural setting of Cooper's 'small town America,' and you have a combination that is very attractive to a global array of editors and photographers. We were able to engender priceless publicity in widely read publications."

Rather than creating packages, each attraction does its own advertising and is represented in a comprehensive "Getaway" booklet readily available around town. The directory lists toll-free numbers and/or Web sites for each attraction. It can also be ordered through a toll-free number or the "Getaway" Web site prior to a visit.

Understandably pleased about what has been accomplished, Greenberg provides figures to support this success story. There are approximately 2,200 permanent residents of Cooperstown. In 1999, the year the public relations firm took on their task, annual visitor numbers hovered around 350,000. In 2001, the count was 500,000. He is particularly proud that, even with such an impressive increase, the program is designed in such a way that it continues to foster the small town atmosphere depicted in James Fenimore Cooper's literary works.

Success Begets Success

Our final profile has a slightly different

twist, where one product became many in spite of itself. It began with a man who had a dream. He wanted to create an art environment for people who "appreciate the beauty of nature and feel the responsibility to preserve it." That man was Robert Redford, and his dream became Sundance.

In 1969, Redford purchased 6,000 acres of mountains and valleys in Utah, known to the early tribal inhabitants of Ute Indians as Sundance Canyon. Originally a collection of rustic buildings in a pristine setting, the Canyon became the birthplace of Sundance Institute in 1981. It was offered to filmmakers and writers as a retreat where their creative efforts would be encouraged and displayed. Out of these gatherings, the phenomenally successful Sundance Film Festival was born.

Sundance is an example of a single-purpose idea whose success has mushroomed into a multi-purpose complex. With the stampede of attendees, Sundance rapidly outgrew its rustic cabins along with its food service. The theater and workshops were overflowing. As each emergency was addressed, demands were met with outside help, and always with an eye on the environment so as not to destroy the breathtaking natural beauty surrounding Redford's resort.

Today, Sundance encompasses 92 world-class accommodations — from cluster units to luxurious mountain retreats — all using rustic woods and native stone. Guests have their choice of a spa and fitness center, spacious outdoor theater, meeting rooms, classes in various art forms, kids' camp, film library, several restaurants, a working organic farm, and a long list of outdoor activities for winter and summer. Of course, the original Sundance Film Festival is still the highlight of the year, but Redford is realizing his dream. Sundance began with one simple plan: to fulfill a need. He wove that plan into a connection with nature, built on it, attracted people who would honor it, and was led far beyond the opening parameters.

No, not all endeavors have Robert Redford's name as a draw, but by expanding the imagination, many marketing ideas can imitate his vision. ■