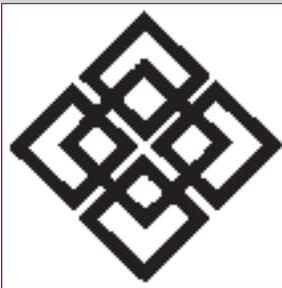


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Urban people seem to need to connect with nature and antique landscapes

Capturing the Character of Rural Communities

Through Tourism Development

By Connie Coley Loden, with Ariana Svenson

As rural communities face challenges in keeping their economies alive and vital, tourism development is seen as an opportunity. For sustainable success, one might look at this in the context of multifaceted development of the *rural product*.

Rural communities have interesting characters and flavors. This is particularly true in places distant from metropolitan areas and landscapes not scarred by urban sprawl. A niche has developed based on the fascination with all things rural. Urban people seem to need to connect with nature and antique landscapes. Today's urban and suburban populations often long for the opportunity to escape. They like the experience of leaving behind the malls, strip developments, and suburban neighborhoods for open vistas, quaint cafes, and pubs. This provides the opportunity for rural communities to fill this niche. Community groups that succeed will use a dynamic tourism program. They know the value of preserving what is authentic and interesting. They also know the drawing power of clusters of interesting sites, activities, and events that can only be accomplished on a regional basis through cooperation.

The purpose of this publication is to introduce readers to some important concepts and practices that professionals and volunteers who promote tourism are finding helpful.

Major Trends

First, let us review some major trends. Historic sites and heritage sites are two of the top attractions tourists look for on vacation, according to research conducted by The Travel Industries Association of America. Their studies also indicate that travelers interested in historic and heritage sites stay longer, spend more money, and take better care of the resources.¹ Nature-based tourism complements heritage tourism by adding value to the experience and increasing the drawing power. Urban people express a growing interest in experiencing natural attractions. Rural regions are working together as a tourist destination. Developing the rural product, which depicts the flavor of the area, creates entrepreneurial opportunities. Visitors want to take home mementos to help them remember the experience. Cottage industry products and locally grown agricultural products are growing in popularity as an alternative to traditional souvenirs. The Internet and web sites are becoming very important for marketing. This has allowed tourist promoters in rural areas to market worldwide.



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Given these trends, communities have a choice; they can welcome strangers or discourage them. Tourism can be well planned, sporadic, or just happen. Making tourism into a true economic development strategy is an outcome of a proactive group process. It works best when the entire community supports it.

Develop the Product and Project the Image

Once the special attributes of a community have been identified, an image must be developed. In developing an image, the community is enhancing the things that make it unique. Then, these features should be interpreted for the visitors. (See worksheet on page eight.)

Characteristics of an Image that Works

- A successful image is a single one that works for both residents and visitors.
- The image is strongly linked to the heritage of the town. It is important that there is community consensus about the value and meaning of local history. (On page 3, see *Tools to Enhance the Value to Tourists*.)
- What are the natural attributes of your area— forest, ocean, or mountains? How do tourist promoters capture this when creating an image?
- How can the communities add value to their natural attractions? Interpretation for particular sites creates a depth of understanding and sharpens the image.
- Ensure that the town's image links into the region's image. Something like timber harvesting may tie in with the next town's Great Lake port for transporting forestry products.

A Case Study:

Iron County is now designated a *Wisconsin Heritage Tourism Area*. It exemplifies how small communities can use heritage and rural tourism in a way that sustains the local flavor that makes it special. Iron County has a total population of 6,861, while Hurley the largest city in the county has a population of 1,818.²

Iron County was first settled in the 1880s with the development of the timber and mining industries. By the early 1980s, these industries had lost strength resulting in an unemployment rate of 22 percent.

The county had experienced some tourism activity. However, this tourism development was happening with little coordination and no unifying image. In 1993, Iron County celebrated its centennial and had such fun telling the stories and history of the area they decided to continue the heritage tourism development initiative. Since beginning the heritage initiative in 1994, Iron County has increased tourism revenues by more than 50 percent (\$51 million annually). This now supports 500 tourism related jobs, according to the Marketing Coordinator, Connie Coley Loden.



Hurley's Story:

Hurley, Wisconsin (Iron County) was well known for its bars, gambling, and showgirls that originated in its lumberjack and mining past. This entertainment industry had become quite notorious across America. Hurley was known as a “wild town!” This bawdy history was seen by many as shameful — something that should be swept under the carpet. Instead, Hurley realized what they had was unique — no one else had this reputation.

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The people of Hurley generated a lot of enthusiasm bringing out the wild character of their town, and at the same time create a sense of pride in their heritage. They resurrected the vaudeville past and have created the *Hurley Players* who dress in heritage costume to create a sense of what the community may have been in its heyday.

This wild past links into the region's timber theme because the loggers used to come to town to "let loose" on the weekends.

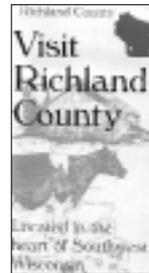
"Always have fun bringing out the character of your town!"

Tools to Enhance the Value of Tourism

In any development project, you need a few tools to produce a quality product. The National Trust for Historic Preservation provides five principles that make effective guidelines when developing heritage tourism. These are the following:³

- *Focus on your authenticity.* Tell the true story of what your area is. Each area is unique in its own special way.
- *Preserve and protect your resources.* Protect special places and qualities that attract visitors. Also, tell the story of the area's culture and traditional practices.
- *Make sites come alive.* Human drama is what people find intriguing. Interpreting this is important. Make the message creative and exciting. Have fun bringing out your heritage. Don't forget that people's heritage is as important as natural heritage. Unusual ideas attract visitors!
- *Find the fit between your community and tourism.* Successful programs must have widespread local acceptance and meet recognized local needs.
- *Collaborate.* Building partnerships is essential. Collaboration between individuals, towns, and regions is important because one attraction alone usually does not create a tourist destination.

Once a community has identified their unique character and image, consideration must be given to linking the character of each town to the larger regional theme. One town most likely won't succeed as a tourist destination on its own. A local or state governmental boundary does not determine a community or an area for tourism promotion. While communities are conscious of municipal boundaries, tourists don't see boundaries and they don't care. Towns who share a particular image or common history need to carefully consider branding themselves as a region or subregion. A region can position itself in the global market. Competition is fierce and the resources are small, so unprecedented levels of cooperation are vital. There is a lot of potential to be tapped through knowing your neighbors and developing a regional advantage.

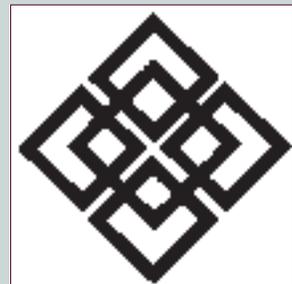


The principles for establishing a regional identity are similar to those applied when developing an image for a community.

- Establish a sense of identity for the region — what do communities have in common?
- Try to incorporate the landscape and sense of place in the logo.
- A regional logo can be the same as or similar to a regional brand. Regional branding is taking the image home with them in the form of a product and an experience.

***One town alone
will most likely
not succeed.***

***Linking several
together to form a
regional identity
works well.***



- The key to branding is that everyone recognizes the brand (or image). It is consistently used with widespread endorsement in the community.
- Build a broad regional picture by linking towns together. Develop your town or accommodation house as a hub of the wheel from which to explore a whole region.
- State, national, or international links are very important, as they draw people in from a wider base.

Regional Product Branding

A benefit of having a strong regional identity is that it can be used to further add value to products (agricultural, art, craft, and local souvenirs) and add a depth of quality to a visit in a region.

For example, by developing an image of freshness and quality, tourists will drive to get there because they believe that they can't get that experience anywhere else. The following are successful ideas.

- The *Something Special from Wisconsin* brand image is applied to identify products grown or produced in that state.
- Bayfield, Wisconsin has developed their image of quiet apple orchards overlooking Lake Superior. This often results in the purchase of apples. "People won't leave the area without a Bayfield apple product," said Carol Demars, Executive Director of the Bayfield Area Chamber of Commerce. This occurs even though comparable apples can be found in other places. Bayfield has a population of 680, but attracts approximately 60,000 people to their annual *AppleFest*. Bayfield has also been awarded the title *Best little town in the Midwest*, by the Chicago Tribune. Festival memberships are offered to tourists so they may remain in contact with the region.
- *The Cranberry Festival* brought the small town of Warrens, Wisconsin statewide and Midwest prominence. This town of 350 attracts more than 100,000 visitors annually to its festival. The event generates \$500,000 of income that helps the community pay for services to residents and upgrades to public facilities, according to Carl Johnson, Executive Director of the Cranberry Festival.



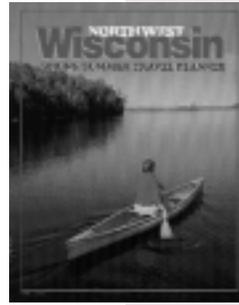
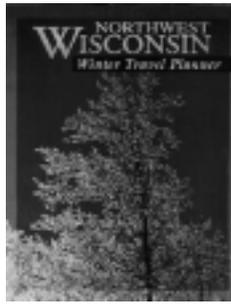
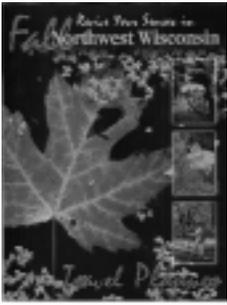
Additional tools

Combine heritage tourism development with other tourism offerings suggested to provide more potential to become a destination. This keeps visitors longer.

Nature-based Tourism — Nature-based tourism centers on the beauty of the natural environment, but draws in a wider range of people than those that are interested in the stronger environmental ethics of eco-tourism.

Eco-Tourism — Eco-tourism is about having a learning experience while on holiday. In today's fast paced, yet ecologically conscious world, everyone wants to be environmentally friendly. On holidays, visitors are seeking a connection with nature. While nature based tourism is also about appreciation of nature, eco-tourism, has a focus on connecting with nature and becoming involved.





Trails — Many communities have existing trails, but can add value to them by making them unique and specific to what that community has to offer. The principles for developing a trail are not dissimilar to that of developing an image for a community or region. Trails can be user specific or themed, such as auto trails, recreational trails, historic trails, or product trails. Trails serve to improve the area’s quality of life and build community pride.

Festivals — Festivals are an important means of adding value to an area and creating a specific reason for a visit. A festival generally celebrates a particular event, which can assist the community in bringing out their pride.

Once the tourism program has created an image and developed this into an attractive product, a tourism committee is ready to promote the area.

Marketing and Promotion

Marketing and promotion does not have to be expensive. However, it needs to look professional and provide access to information in a user-friendly manner. Develop a logo to project a single expression of an image. It is important that it is simple, but conveys the message. Iron County’s *Rooted in Resources* image is represented in a logo that centers on its forest, with reference to the mining and timber industries that developed as the base of the economy. It takes many impressions of the same image to create a lasting identity. Continued and repetitious use of a logo helps to imprint the image in the minds of the targeted customer base.

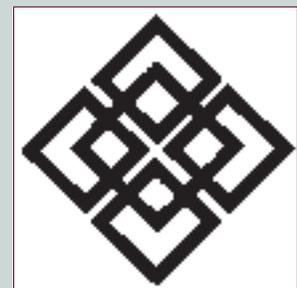


Create quality materials. An organization’s publications and printed materials present the image. Putting out information that is less than professional does more harm than good. Don’t try to make your promotions be everything to everyone; target costumers. Spending large amounts of money on advertising can be very costly, particularly if the advertising is slightly off target. It is far more cost effective to network and develop good relationships with those in the media.

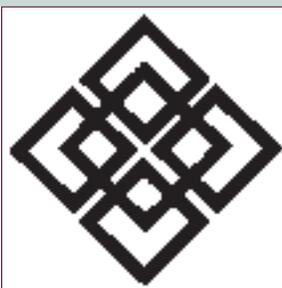
Creating media networks and communicating the uniqueness of each area’s assets and attractions pays off in media coverage not easily bought. This is much more effective than purchased media coverage.⁴

- Having one-on-one relationships with the news media and tourism representatives can make the difference in whether your area is included or not. Cultivating and maintaining relationships is also important.
- Host familiarization tours for travel writers to develop new contacts and relationships.

It takes many impressions of the same image to create a lasting identity.



Websites are emerging as an important marketing tool.



- Create and maintain a photo library as publications are always looking for good photos. If photos can be provided, then your organization will be featured more often.

Web sites are emerging as an important marketing tool in the travel industry. Use is growing exponentially. More than 40 percent of the traveling public looked first on the Internet. To be competitive, you must have a quality presence on the Internet today.⁵

- Sites must be user friendly, not just flashy.
- They should load fast (don't have large graphic files).
- Don't have too many layers to reach key information.
- Link to state and regional organizations.

Now, the question always is locating resources.

How to Find Financial Resources?

Financial resources within rural communities usually appear limited and that's a challenge. Be creative. To generate funds survey a variety of sources. Solicit donations of goods and services to underwrite the project.

- *Be Creative with Funding Sources.* Learn how to interpret the mission of each funding source and look for good matches. Iron County used US Forest Service funds to develop a mountain bike trail system as part of a study to evaluate the impact of a new trail system as a means to diversify a natural resource-based regional economy.
- *Integrate Projects and Grant Funds.* Use grant programs that compliment each other to finance different parts of a project. Iron County successfully applied for and received a number of grants to fund the development of heritage sites and multi-modal self-guided tours.
- *Break Projects Into Small Pieces.* By breaking the project into many pieces, it is easier to secure funds for different aspects. The Iron County Heritage Area project sold heritage signs to municipalities, utility companies, chambers of commerce, historical museums, banks, foundations, and other sponsors.
- *Build Relationships.* Making connections with other people, organizations, regions and communities that use and take an interest in rural tourism development, will lead to new ways to design, fund, and complete projects.
- *Wear Your Project on Your Sleeve.* Talking about what you are doing with rural tourism development often leads to new relationships that may become possible funding sources. In the Iron County project, this happened several times. Both of the family foundation funding sources appeared through this process. Other sources of funding and many ideas surfaced in similar ways.

In Summary

Rural tourism development is not a panacea. However, it can stimulate the rural economy. This economic activity may support some additional services and amenities that would not be otherwise present. Planning and developing the rural product should enhance a community's image, build up pride, and improving the quality of life for area residents.

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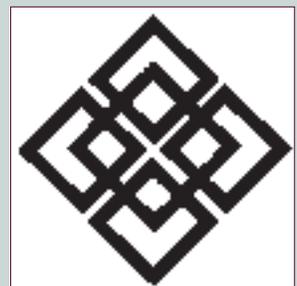
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WORKSHEET

Producing the Rural Tourism Product

Use this worksheet and take the time to identify what image and character your community wants to project. Decide what is worth preserving, needs improving, and could be created to develop the rural product.

The community needs to ask itself these questions:

1. What makes the area special?
2. How can this be conveyed to visitors?
3. What needs to be done to enhance the special attributes?
4. How can one tourism group link with others in the region?

