



Co-operative Tourism Marketing Workshop
Quebec Lodge – Red Rock
Final Report



Superior North CFDC
SADC Supérieur Nord

1. Background

The Co-operative Tourism Marketing Workshop was developed to bring together tourism providers and tourism related businesses from the North Shore communities of Lake Superior to promote peer to peer networking, to share ideas and to initiate exploratory discussions around the potential for future cooperative tourism marketing initiatives in the region.

The tourism market currently presents some of the most prominent economic opportunities for the communities, businesses and individuals located along Lake Superior's North Shore. However most of the area's tourism providers are small operators, such as family or individually run businesses, and many cater to niche markets such as hiking, fishing and special events. Moreover, the area's small operators usually work with limited financial and human resources and therefore, the effort required to handle business activities such as marketing, can be overwhelming or simply out of reach.

The impetus for the Co-operative Tourism Marketing Workshop came from Ray Rivard of Nipigon River Adventures and the Quebec Lodge. As a tourism operator, Ray had been working informally with a number of other tourist operators in the area over the past year. Ray felt that there were potentially many other individuals, businesses and groups who might benefit from working with each other, instead of operating in isolation or competition. He also felt that it might be beneficial to all if area businesses co-operated in developing joint marketing plans and/or packages. The concept of bringing potential tourism stakeholders together to discuss working jointly in a more formal capacity was therefore born.

2. Methodology

In April 2009, Firedog Communications was hired to plan and facilitate the 1.5 days Co-operative Tourism Marketing Workshop for regional tourism operators, groups and other tourism stakeholders. An invitation was created with preparatory information for potential participants and a workshop agenda was developed. The invitation package was distributed to tourism outfitters, operators, businesses and groups in the various communities along the North Shore of Lake Superior including the townships of Dorion, Rosspoint, Red Rock, Nipigon, Schreiber, and Terrace Bay with support from the Economic Development Officers of Red Rock and Nipigon.

The workshop agenda took place over 1.5 days from 24th – 25th April, 2009 and included both formal and informal activities. All participants were encouraged to attend the informal networking activities that took place on Friday 24th April, 2009. The evening's activities were designed to help the networking and collaborative process in preparation for the formal workshop discussions on Saturday 25th April. In preparation for the informal evening, participants were asked to bring the following items to the session:

- Business cards (where applicable)
- Brochures or pamphlets about your business (where applicable)
- A short description of their business
- A short description of their target markets/customers
- Examples of previously undertaken marketing activity (where applicable)

Twenty tourist operators and tourism stakeholders, with a strong core from the Nipigon and Red Rock areas, came together on April 24th 2009 to participate in the informal workshop activities. The evening's agenda included various ice-breaker activities that allowed participants to learn about each other's businesses, business goals, achievements, challenges and upcoming initiatives. At the end of the informal evening of activities, the majority of the participating businesses had made new contacts and initiated discussions around opportunities to work collaboratively on future projects.

The following day's agenda adopted a more formal format and opened with a PowerPoint presentation from the facilitator about cooperative marketing, its benefits and uses. The PowerPoint provided a natural gateway from which to generate strategic thinking and discussion between the participants related to their own businesses and communities.

3. Workshop Agenda

Friday 24th April

- 6:00 pm – 6:15 pm: Welcome Remarks
- 6:15 pm - 7:00 pm: Symposium – *Wine & Cheese*
- 7:00 pm – 8:30 pm: *Getting To Know You* Ice-Breaker Activity
- 8:30 pm – 9:00 pm: Informal Networking

Saturday 25th April

(Morning Session):

- 9:00 am – 9:30 am: Presentation: *What is Co-operative Tourism Marketing?*
- 9:30 am – 10:00 am: Group Discussion: *Where Are We Now?*
- Tourism Marketing Issues for North Shore Operators
- 10:00 am – 10:15 am: Morning Networking Break
- 10:15 am- 11:00 am: Group Discussion: *Tourism Marketing Needs of North Shore Operators*
- 11:00 – 12:00 noon: Group Brainstorm: *Opportunities & Challenges for Growth*
- Noon – 1:00 pm: Luncheon

(Afternoon Session):

- 1:00 pm – 2:00 pm: Formal Discussion: *Making Co-operative Marketing More Successful*
- 2:00 pm – 2:30 pm: Afternoon Networking Break
- 2:30 pm – 3:30 pm: Formal Discussion: *Co-operative Marketing Action Planning*
- 3:30 pm: Close.

4. Key Findings

Saturday 25th April – Morning Session

Twelve participants attended the morning session of the workshop. Key findings were recorded as follows:

4.1. Major Tourism Issues for North Shore Operators include:

- Segregation and lack of cooperation between communities
- No common tourism identity
- Government regulations
- Media coverage of the area/region is poor
- Decrease in number of visitors to the area
- Municipal regulations are too stringent
- Lack of available capital for infrastructure
- Lack of local resources/support services for tourism businesses
- Lack of services people & training to create local ambassadors
- Training of people in Government is weak and they can not help with problems
- No formal structure or proponent to help coordinate cooperative marketing initiatives
- Human & financial resources are lacking to support the structure or proponent
- No local help or contact person to help address tourism issues at the provincial levels
- Roads/Infrastructure need upgrades to attract tourists and be competitive
- Budget is too small to promote tourism to the area
- Price of gas & utilities is hurting local tourism businesses and visitors
- Highway services are poor quality and/or lacking
- Liability insurance is too expensive
- Information sharing & communication between communities is lacking
- Poor civic pride exists in all communities – homes, streets and businesses lack curb appeal

4.2. Tourism Marketing Needs of North Shore Operators include:

- Better access to local areas and improved infrastructure– improved highways, roads, lighting, rest stops, information services and signage etc.
- A local contact or area resource to act as the ‘go-to’ on tourism issues.
- More capital such as grants and forgivable loans for tourism businesses for improvements, upgrades and start-up. Entrepreneurs over 30 years are offered little to no government programming and resources to start or grow a business.
- A formal Communications Plan with a strategy to improve information sharing at all levels
- Creative and eye-catching signage to be used as directional landmarks for visitors.
- Investment in attractions development and promotion.
- Market research to survey Ontarians about North Shore of Lake Superior. Do they really know about us?
- To market the area to Canadians as opposed to concentrating on Americans. “Staycationers” and Ontario, Quebec and Manitoban markets present opportunity.
- More workshop & networking opportunities for area tourism businesses.
- MNR resources and staff need to be more available.
- Human contact with Government agencies is a must instead of phone systems and websites.
- Government needs to be held accountable to tourism businesses in the North and our voices need to be heard.
- Publicity for the North is required and for distribution outside of the North – a 4 season’s video/DVD would be useful that could be aired in broader Canadian markets.
- Advertising for the North to rest of Ontario.
- A formal marketing association for the communities along the North Shore of Lake Superior
- We need to give people a reason so stop in our communities. We are at the crossroads of Canada but people pass right through without stopping.
- Tourism packages are needed for the area that offer visitors a combination tourism experience and promote a variety of businesses.
- There is a need for a regional tourism coordinator to work with North Shore communities and businesses to develop tourism packages and other synergies/strategies.
- Businesses and communities need to cluster to promote the area and have maximum reach and impact. A *Top of Lake Superior* association or group would be relevant.
- Better promotion of our border crossings – Pigeon River is relatively unknown.

4.3 Summary of Findings:

Initial discussions with all participants during the morning session ascertained that there were a lot of common concerns within the group. Each of the participants was finding that the costs and energy of marketing was too expensive for an individual businesses and communities to take on alone. Additionally, they also felt that the level of support services and coordinated action from all levels of government (Municipal, Provincial and Federal) was insufficient to adequately promote the area and create an impact. The group generally reflected the feelings that working together to pool resources and experience could benefit each business and community, while easing the burden of carrying out these tasks alone.

The group also recognized that amount of effort required to create an impact in promoting area tourism and/or any of the aforementioned initiatives would require a formal structure or proponent. The emergence of a sub-regional cooperative agreement in which neighbouring communities and businesses could jointly market was perceived as a positive means to increase the value and synergy for the tourist and the participating local businesses and economies.

Throughout the morning session, participating businesses were able to share their ideas and upcoming initiatives with the other participants. Some participants asked for cross promotional assistance from businesses for their initiatives, some were seeking sponsorship or logistical support and others simply requested help in promoting initiatives through word of mouth and referrals. At all levels, the appetite and responsiveness to assist participants with their requests was positive and significant relationship building was achieved. Several opportunities to work together and participate in each other's events were identified between businesses. Informal commitments were made between participants to meet and follow up on these opportunities after the workshop.

5. Key Findings

Saturday 25th April – Afternoon Session

During the afternoon discussions a core of people emerged who seemed to have enough energy, desire and a strong commitment for working together on tourism promotion initiatives. The format of the afternoon session evolved from general discussions about local needs, issues and opportunities, to outlining a more formalized strategy to move the concept of cooperative marketing forward. The following ideas emerged for building successful cooperative marketing strategies within the area:

- Sharing website links between businesses/groups
- Build, develop and promote tourism product packages for the area such as:
 - Day camps
 - Free golf
 - Different stays/lengths
 - Stay, play & eat
 - Points plan for customers
 - Top of Lake Superior Bucks
 - Discount coupon booklet
 - Group tour packages that can be sold by wholesalers
- Create a Business Council/Alliance to promote tourism and packages
- Coordinate cooperative tourism efforts through the Chamber of Commerce function
- Hire 'Feet on the Street' to build relationships, synergies and packages between businesses and communities
- Access training and funding for quality local tourism staff
- Introduce the Ambassadors program
- Attend Trade Shows/Sports Show together to make participation affordable
- Develop a Marketing Plan for tourism packages to wholesalers
- Build a process for promoting cooperative tourism packages that involves a structure including: **Community Economic Development Offices + Businesses + Wholesalers**
- Create marketing tools to promote tourism packages and particularly a website.

5.1 Summary of Findings:

The main identified aim was to pool the marketing resources of local tourism businesses so that each business can concentrate its efforts on doing what it does best, whether that be organizing kayaking tours, providing accommodations or developing unique excursions to visit the features and history of the region. By working together to develop and offer marketing programs, participants felt that they would be able to focus on improving and expanding their own operations, while increasing the scale of promotional activities to wider audiences. Most importantly, as a cooperative effort is able to collectively deliver products/services, participants felt that the concept would offer more complete service packages that bring together complimentary local products and skills.

Other goals included the development of wider connections that could bring together businesses that are regularly isolated from each other. An example included a participating fly-in outpost located in the Armstrong area who discussed the potential of developing and promoting larger fishing packages. This benefit goes beyond connecting the local visitor with the local tourist provider and instead involves connecting business and communities across the region, as well as connecting groups and individuals together. By increasing awareness of what the area has to offer, and connecting business and communities across the North Shore, participants felt that they could facilitate the creation of improved tourism product offerings in general.

The group also identified the need to work with wholesalers to increase awareness of the communities located along the North Shore of Lake Superior as a whole. It was suggested that this could take place through the proposed tourism coordinator function and include concepts such as multi-community tours and packages that focus on themes such as fishing, sailing or relaxation, among other things.

The group discussed several different models for organizing themselves, including informal initiatives that could commence immediately, creating a paid membership driven association, as well as hiring a local tourism coordinator for the area. During this afternoon discussion, the group decided that a cooperative form organized through the community economic development offices would potentially work best. It was suggested that a tourism coordinator be hired through the community economic development offices to coordinate and liaise with area businesses and potential stakeholders. In particular, the community economic development offices seemed the most appropriate as community involvement and engagement in the initiative will be vital to success, as identified by the group.

6. Future Actions

Concerns were raised in the afternoon regarding the expected outcomes and follow-up from the workshop. In fact, participants voiced their frustrations at participating in several workshops to date that had produced no further actions, plans or results. In light of the concerns raised, a plan for future actions and recommendations was developed.

The workshop participants identified that the following critical path should be pursued to achieve the identified goals of the group in a formal manner:

Critical Path:

- Receive and approve the consultant's report from the workshop sessions;
- Seek support from the Economic Development Offices to work on cooperative tourism initiatives;
- Hold follow-up workshops/meetings for existing and new stakeholders;
- Seek the support of town councils to pursue cooperative tourism marketing through the Community Economic Development Offices;
- Hire a Tourism Coordinator to work with area businesses;
- Develop a formal Communications Plan;
- Develop and implement an organizational process/structure;
- Develop a cooperative tourism Marketing Plan;
- Develop tourism packages with stakeholders;
- Develop and create cooperative marketing tools:
 - Website
 - Materials – maps, brochures, trade show booths etc.
 - Identify and attend tourism shows

Concurrent to the formal process and critical path, it was also suggested that informal cooperative marketing initiatives should continue between businesses and participants in order to maximize on immediate opportunities for the upcoming season such as creating golf packages.

7. Recommendations:

The following actions are recommended by the consultants based on the feedback and input received:

- Seek out funding for future workshops and discussions with broader tourism stakeholders in the region- broader participation is required;
- Build larger industry support and buy-in into the concept of cooperative tourism marketing opportunities;
- Seek government support at all levels for the concept of coordinated action on tourism marketing;
- Seek human and financial resources to work with industry (businesses) to develop a cooperative marketing program;
- Make the recommendation that the coordination of any cooperative marketing effort be channeled through community economic development;
- Seek out funding for organizational start-up development of a North Shore tourism cooperative;
- Develop processes and structures for accountability and management of the initiative;
- Develop Terms of Reference for the cooperative initiative;
- Investigate the how best to capitalize on the potential for growth in the tourism industry through cooperative marketing efforts;
- Seek out opportunities to build and enhance the profile and image of destinations along the North Shore of Lake Superior;
- Develop and implement a Communications Plan;
- Provide recommendations to Government on how to make the area more tourist oriented through coordinated action along the Top of Superior.

8. Looking to the Future

The vision and enthusiasm of the participants attending the workshop was inspiring in its aim to bring back a sense of local cooperation, sustainability and pride by building upon the local resources and talents present in the North Shore communities. As many communities face economic crises as a result of failing resource-based industries, people across the region are hopeful that the existing strengths and opportunities in their areas can lead to better lives for themselves, their families and their communities. In many rural communities along the North Shore, tourism plays a vital role and is an economic engine that creates jobs and increases rural incomes. By focusing on revitalizing community economies by bringing together local tourism businesses to make them stronger, there is hope for small business operators and communities who are overwhelmed by their workload and disenchanted by their isolation. With additional support and services, together tourism stakeholders along the North Shore of Lake Superior will have a louder voice in the highly competitive tourism marketing business and bring improved benefits for all to their respective communities.

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