

Covid-19 Business Adaptations That Will be Retained in 2021



Topic Summary

We are faced with adapting to change; some will look to mitigate the short-term, while others look at each investment with an eye to the strategic long-term evolution of their business. Todd and Tim Lucier, of Northern Edge Algonquin, led discussions highlighting changes his company has implemented as a result of COVID-19 while sharing his reflections on pivoting his business when the smaller SARS pandemic hit in 2003.

External forces will always challenge operators to rethink and reimagine what the ideal guest experience may be. This summary highlights the discussion and ideas generated by 20 tourism operators/professionals regarding adaptations as a result of COVID-19 that are expected to be retained.

Tactical-Practical Take-Aways

- Accept forced change as an opportunity to evolve your business; use it as an opportunity to innovate and create.
- Develop a mindset of continuous improvement and learning. Reflect on the changes made that improved the experience and those where a return to previous practices is in order. Continue to take small steps towards further improvements.
- Invest in things you can control, manage those you cannot.
- Take advantage of the traveller's desire to engage in "their bubble" creating valued experiences.
- Re-envision the natural spaces you own, or have access to, as stages for new, smaller, more intimate guest opportunities.
- When moving indoor experiences outdoors look at what additional value can be added.
- Partner with others to help you envision how to do things differently.
- Focus on what fills your heart and addresses your purpose.

Industry Topic Specialist

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New Ideas shared at this session

Businesses have made strategic investments of time and money in a number of areas. Those discussed at the most recent session related to five areas and included:

Physical space & Infrastructure

- Investing in infrastructure that provides mobility and allows a business to take equipment to new outdoor areas rather than be restricted to one physical location, which opens new markets to the experience.
- Thinking of alternative uses for existing physical spaces can provide an opportunity to find and develop new markets (e.g., bringing in a darts league provided a new market for the local axe throwing business).
- Investing to create cozy outdoor gathering areas, such as fire pits/tables for bubbles to gather around during outdoor performances can create new opportunities to blend indoor and outdoor experiences.

Technology & Processes

- Many used the time to learn new about new technologies, make upgrades and define more efficient processes (e.g., using e-commerce apps such as Alpaca to schedule pick-ups, and integrating e-commerce with social media).

Serving new markets

- Marketing to the hyper local customer has resulted in locals having a better understanding of the experiences available in their area, making them better ambassadors when travel restarts.
- Campaigns aimed at locals have allowed marketers to test new tactics and learn what might be successful when marketing to visitors from afar.
- Food is a draw – for locals and visitors, in social media eyeballs gravitate to pictures of food.

Partnerships

- New partnerships are emerging between businesses who have infrastructure/space and those who need infrastructure/space providing a less expensive alternative to building their own.

Experience design

- Consumers have adapted to pre-visit screening forms and Northern Edge is leveraging the extra information they have to gather through COVID pre-screening forms to gain a better understanding of their customer relative to a variety of facets, and is using this information to enhance and personalize their experience delivery.
- Intentionally designing outdoor experiences with elements that bring people inside for a specific activity/breaks to address the cold weather.

Ideas shared at previous sessions

Create the “New Natural”

Todd Lucier introduced the concept of the “New Natural” suggesting that successful operators will review their experience and make modifications that are in alignment with their values and the new environment such that the changes seem natural to the guest rather than forced. It is more about evolving the experience than changing it.

- Gananoque 1000 Islands Playhouse had an outdoor event Music on the Dock; in 2020 and social distancing requirements, the dock was not large enough so they partnered with the city to create Music on the Block, offering events at parks and other community spaces throughout the city; they are offering a second outdoor series this winter.
- Northern Edge Algonquin addressed this a number of ways, including the creation of natural gathering and dining areas outdoors for smaller groups;

extending the focus of nature connection and outdoor experiences as core programming.

- Elmhirst’s Resort enhanced their cleaning procedures and standards and also provided guests with the tools to do their own, additional, disinfecting within their rooms – an enhancement that gave the customer control of their own cleanliness and resulted in higher satisfaction scores.

Think strategically

When considering changes and investments, take a long-term perspective.

- A focus on the outdoors can be a good near and long-term strategy given the positive effect nature has on reducing anxiety and stress.
- Westben stayed connected with their guests by building their subscription base to be well positioned for the future. This drove the development of podcasts and digital concerts, that provided music and were designed to create a sense of place so that those watching the concerts would want to visit in the future.
- Partnerships formed for the purpose of creating a visitor experience may also be useful in developing a business-to-business opportunity. For example, the Westben Centre for Connection and Creativity worked with a videographer and sound technician to create a visitor experience and can now explore offering similar services to others businesses interested in incorporating music in the outdoors into live/digital experiences.
- Northern Edge Algonquin evaluated changes through the lens of the ‘new natural’.
- Elmhirst’s Resort invested in technology to facilitate guest interactions with the front desk.

Continuous learning & improvements

Continuous learning / improvement is a good business practice – successful operators will respond to change, address it and learn from it. This has been a year of experimentation that has resulted in identifying new opportunities and developing new experiences:

- Learning often requires a business to step out of its comfort zone; eliciting the help of partners can be one way to see from a different perspective and creatively consider new possibilities.
- Parks Canada used 3-D camera technology to provide a virtual tour of places guests cannot access (i.e., depths of buildings), creating an

interest in visiting the site at another time. They also renovated old lockmaster houses to use as guesthouses, tapping into people's desire for interesting and safe getaways (fully booked for 2021 season).

At Northern Edge, we operate our business with the principles of continuous improvement or Kaizen, which asks: "How can our services and experiences continually improve? Sometimes we need a little push, like the current pandemic to realize what we had was good, but there is always room for improvement."
– Todd Lucier

Focus on what you are able to control

When things are in constant flux and there is a lack of clarity it can be helpful to focus on that which can be controlled.

- There is a Scandinavian saying: "There is no bad weather, only bad clothing." Given this, consider the approach taken by storm tourism operators on the west coast and invest in key items of clothing or smaller items such as Hot Paws, to ensure guest comfort. At minimum include guest information regarding what to bring and wear.
- Leadership at Elmhirst's Resort made a commitment to this early on and addressed those areas that would have them ready to open once the government gave the OK. This included re-defining their standard operating procedures and getting them on paper so that able to implement them quickly once given the green light.

New design criteria

In designing new experiences or evolving existing ones, the question was "How to use the restrictions to create something better in the long term, rather than simply addressing a short-term situation.

- Enjoying the outdoors is perceived as safer and has become more important to people. Activities many traditionally prefer to do indoors such as yoga, can be staged outdoors for 'snowga' (yoga in the snow).
- Outdoor entertainment and dining experiences such as the University of Alberta Botanical Garden's Twilight Picnic Box Experience or Northern Light Dining Experience will have an edge. Another example is A. Murray Schaefer's opera The Princess of the Stars that was first performed in 1981 outside Toronto on Heart Lake. Great ideas can be inspiration for new experiences.

- Using the outdoors as a venue is also providing interesting partnerships, for example, Comedy Country partnered with Cabin Fever Kayak for Prince Edward County's comedy festival providing a fun, new, socially distanced venue for the festival.
- The concept of safe space has become much more important to people and needs to be addressed as part of the design criteria. Elmhirst's Resort room cleaning procedures are an example of this, as is the booking process they implemented for guests to use spaces (i.e., areas at the pool) and participate in activities as it allowed them the opportunity to schedule cleaning and to do so in a visible way such that the guest had a sense of security.
- Putting control into the guest's hands – as indicated above, Elmhirst Resort provided guests with the tools to do their own additional room cleaning; implementing an activity booking system also provided guest's with control of their experiences as it allowed them to plan their day and not waste time lining up for an activity thereby providing a better overall guest experience.
- Shifting from mass experiences to smaller groups offers higher engagement and is in complete alignment with the principles of experiential travel. This will in turn offer operators providing higher value to the guest the opportunity to increase price.
- Look at the new activities people are doing. An example raised related to drones – with more people owning drones what experiences can be created that access this interest, perhaps a park where they can learn how to fly drones and run them through an obstacle course.
- Bringing the online and physical environments together in new ways to connect with others was done well when a business decided to host a Christmas party for their clients. Sending out a charcuterie board and bottle of wine with an

"COVID-19 has pushed us all to be stronger in new and different ways in the online world – it provide many more opportunities to connect than sales and marketing."

– Nancy Arsenault

invitation to get dressed in "your finest" and join the party that consisted of a great jazz band and the opportunity to connect with others "at the party". People were so engaged that the party continued in the chat room long after the band had finished.

Additional Helpful Links

Background on [Kaizen](#)

Federal funding support for live events – [Budget announcement for tourism funding](#)

Northumberland County's [Digital Main Street Program](#)

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