

Creative Outdoor Space Design for Combatting COVID-19

Discussion Ideas & Tips

COVID-19 has inspired many businesses to creatively adapt their outdoor spaces in order to drive new business as a result of the pandemic. This summary highlights the approaches, insights and ideas from 12 Ontario-based tourism operators/professionals.

Tactical-Practical Take Aways

1. Have a plan that addresses different scenarios. Not a multi-page document but something succinct, a drawing or statement that outlines what want to do, what it looks like, why it is important and how it will be done.
2. Don't get caught up in the details. If your original idea doesn't pan out exactly as envisioned, run with it, learn from it and make adjustments along the way. The customer will not know; to them it is a new and cool space/experience, finishing touches can happen once you see how customers react.
3. Identify and develop community relationships with people who are important to the business. These include municipal/township planners, local politicians, local suppliers, media contacts, etc.
4. Work with government officials. Invite them to your business to see what you are planning and engage in a conversation about how the change will create a new, safe customer experience and long-term business opportunity. Providing them with a sense of place can help secure their buy-in.
5. Buy local. Invest in local suppliers and they are likely to return the favour. Perhaps there is a win-win opportunity to barter for supplies/labour.
6. Manage risk and invest for the long term. Think about the changes being made as trials of new/extended guest offers, not one off short-term solutions. Identify and collect metrics that can help you decide/make the case to continue with the new innovations. Metrics could include scores related to customer satisfaction and expectations as well as estimates of future tax revenues for the city based on increased volumes.

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7. Communicate success. Capture and share success stories – with guests, funders, suppliers, partners and influencers (i.e., local politicians) – they show resiliency and the ability to adapt and grow.
8. Think small – grow big. Look at what can be done for small groups (pods) that allows for growth.

“You have to have vision. Don't worry if it [the result] doesn't look exactly as you thought at first, because the customer has no idea.”

– Gillain Exton

Additional ideas shared included:

- Municipalities have been changing streetscapes by closing off smaller streets that come into main/commercial streets in order to create outdoor gathering spaces with planters and distanced tables and chairs. Such spaces often have local business sponsors who will maintain the space but they are not 'owned' by the business.
- Add fire pits to the grounds as a way for small pods of customers to stay warm while gathering outside. The City of Calgary's winter fire pits program, was so popular when it first launched the city has decided to add 70 more fire pits to the 33 it started with. Resorts have also found the fire pits to offer a way to help small groups socially distance throughout their property. They can also be used to sell outdoor food experiences such as packaged picnics.

- Elmhirt’s Resort redefined their small group wedding experience as a result of COVID-19 protocols. Dancing and after parties are no longer permitted, so they created smore’s kits as an alternative social closure to the evening. Guests head out to the fire pit to make their smore’s before heading in for the night.
- Sweden’s [Edible Country](#) offer do-it-yourself fine-dining through an interesting collaboration with four Michelin-starred chefs, to create inspirational menus featuring local produce that can be foraged to help you experience the Swedish pantry. Book a table, head outdoors, find your food and cook it up.
- Elmirst’s Resort created an outdoor adventure [Escape the Maze](#) for the family, fashioned after “The Amazing Race”. It was so successful they intend to continue offering it.
- The municipality of Port Hope is exploring new ways to present outdoor spaces for smaller experiences. In 2020, they involved the business community to create an outdoor gallery using the store windows to hold the art. The result, an outdoor gallery experience and people were often drawn into the business. Future evolutions include the possibility of adding QR codes to engage more senses such as music to enhance the experience of viewing the art and the voice of an artist sharing their story.
- Small can be beautiful. The Stuff store in Lakefield, ON added an LED tree to beautify their exterior. People came by to check it out, took selfies and posted their social channels. This has inspired the company to create a “Loving Tree” where people can leave a message of thanks or love on the tree for Valentines. Investments don’t always have to be large, think ‘stopping points’ that will engage the community and your customers.
- Extend the time of a season. Given restrictions in numbers and fear of crowds, people are looking for different ways and even times to celebrate. Consider ways to extend Valentines Day, Easter, Mother’s/Father’s Day from days to weeks in order to capitalize on people’s desire to celebrate in a safe (non-crowded) manner.
- Make the guest space fully self-sufficient. Beachwood Resort added ladders to the docks in front of each of their cabins so that it was easier for guests to remain in their pod and swim (and get out of the water) at their dock rather than swim from a common swimming area.

Additional Helpful Links

The Globe & Mail: [Fire pits are this winter's hottest accessory as outdoor living becomes a pandemic lifestyle](#)

Trendwatching Innovation of the Day: [Dutch restaurant Bij de Tuinman launches socially distanced neighborhood dining](#)

Richard Louv blog post: [What is Nature-Deficit Disorder?](#)

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