

Growth Strategy: A Coalition of the Willing

Discussion Ideas & Tips

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced every tourism business to look into their crystal ball and decide where to invest their precious cash reserves and/or take out a business development loan for a future that is still being defined. This summary highlights discussions held with nine operators/professionals regarding the actions taken and human and financial investments made over the last year to secure the future of their businesses.

Tactical Practical Take-Aways

- Identify your Coalition of the Willing - businesses who share similar values, attitudes and want to work together to rebuild their business to lead their way out of the pandemic. Partnerships can reduce the overall risk to the business through the sharing of resources, assets and costs and provide new reasons to visitors a destination, by:
 - Creating consumer confidence in the community **and** the businesses – so visitors feel safe.
 - Offering a variety of safe tours from multiple operators – provides choice, possibly increases length of stay (when able to stay overnight).
 - Share research to better understand the (new) customer – provides input to modifications / creation of new, collaborative, product offers.
- Collaborating strengthens the community, “the competition is not across the street but on the other side of the world.”

New Ideas Discussed

- Operators are concerned about investing during COVID-19. Suggestions to help assess included:
 - Invest time to prepare for multiple ‘travel/lockdown’ scenarios so that when things change you are ready and can adapt quickly.

Industry Topic Specialist

Name: [Ian Stone](#)
 Position: [Owner/Guide](#)
 Company: [Tour Gros Morne](#), [Taste of Gros Morne](#), [AHOI](#)
 Location: [Gros Morne, NFLD](#)
ianwstone@gmail.com

- Consider the business and the community when making an investment, ideally it will be a win for both, but if things don’t work out chances are there were wins for one or the other – find and focus on the wins that help keep you motivated.
- Establish partnerships for new experiences that share the risk provide visitors with more diverse product offers than you can offer alone.
- Rather than invest in building your own infrastructure explore paying a fee to use existing facilities in your community.
- Align your community welcome with your business welcome. This will be critical in 2021.
 - Ensure visitors know what is open and when. [Visit Gros Morne](#) addresses this using [Airtable](#). Businesses with the coalition have a common place to list online and visitors had a central place that provides opening/closing dates, hours of operation and each businesses’ COVID-19 protocols.
 - Businesses need to think about their community and their customers.
 - [Visit Gros Morne](#) showed a focus on community safety by putting hand sanitizer out in the community (e.g., at trail heads and other public places) to help the community understand that their health and safety was paramount.

- Offer a seamless guest experience with COVID protocols between operators partnering to deliver an experience.
- Mitigate risks associated with visitors coming to your community by:
 - Adhering to all government protocols is the minimum; some operators go beyond (e.g., require a mask even if outdoors) believing additional safety measures will protect them from potential insurance claims.
 - Communicating with employees, the community, and customers. Even if there is nothing new, continue to provide assurance. Using a tone that addresses community concerns can keep people engaged and less likely to be concerned with your operations. Writers at Woody Point did this very well.
 - Addressing the reality of higher business costs by calculated fee increases. While the moderate/ lower income traveller may be feeling the pinch, it is the higher income travellers that are likely to be first out and can higher fees. Plus, the smaller group size provides a better visitor experience that we are seeing that visitors are willing to pay for.
 - Many operators have needed to generate revenues outside the traditional May-October period and have invested in developing new experiences for the November-April period. This investment can be leveraged in the future as the industry has been looking for year-round experiences to offer visitors.
- Look outward and identify opportunities to provide the connective tissue within the community and with customers. Canmore Uncorked moved their food and drink festival online.
- Online and outdoor food and drink experiences have exploded as a result of COVID-19 (e.g., Prairie Gardens, UofA Botanic Garden) and businesses are planning to continue these in 2021.
- Ensure your websites is up to date in terms of presentation of content and functionality.
- Understanding the largest generation since the Baby Boomers, Millennials (1981-1996) followed by Gen Zs (1995-2010) in order to build experiences they are looking for; these generations represent the future of travel.
- Improving health and safety for employees as well as customers. This may include becoming more accessible workplace/experience.
- The following were suggested as ways to optimize new, or maximize previous investments in imagery:
 - When investing in photography/ videography, request b-roll footage so that it is available for additional purposes at a later time. And if a DMO is sending someone to take photographs/video of your operation, ask if you can have the b-roll to repurpose for your website and social channels.
 - Consider repositioning pre-pandemic images that don't illustrate current COVID-19 practices with messages that suggest groups are travelling as a bubble so your images are seen as reflective of current protocols.
 - An updated phone is an effective low-cost investment that takes great pictures/videos for use on social media. In the digital environment visuals win – use more pictures, less text.
- Think long-term when making investments. As much as possible the changes a business makes and the money spent should tie to a business' long-term sustainable plan for the future.
- Make sure marketing investments are focused on channels that are used by the target audience. Millennials are more likely to be on Instagram , Baby Boomers on Facebook and Gen Z on TikTok. Facebook is also stronger for food and Instagram for travel. Find out what channels are best for your business and use them.
- Refine the target market. Generations are large, think about specific demographics or communities of interest to focus on as a way to increase the effectiveness of your marketing spend.
- Listen to what customers are saying. When the pandemic first started businesses did not know what was needed, now, a year in there is a better understanding of the longer-term impacts and consumers have a better sense of what they want. Listen and determine how to provide it.

Additional Ideas shared at previous sessions

- The following were identified as low risk, long-term investment opportunities every business should be addressing:
 - Updating digital technology (website, e-commerce, social media). COVID-19 has catapulted businesses and consumers into the digital world and businesses must have

- Travel trade companies are starting to promote within Canada. If working with travel trade find out what they are doing, the markets they are targeting and the types of experiences in a COVID-world, they are looking for. Tour operators need to ensure they are working with travel trade that understand the experience being offered and is engaging with their target customer.
- Where feasible pilot new experiences in order to identify glitches and test market receptivity before committing to the expense of a full launch.
- Partner with others to share the risks, rewards, and market reach for product innovation. Develop partnerships with care. Ensure there is a values alignment as well as practical elements such as the financial commitment, delivery methods, timelines, roles and responsibilities, and measures of success.
- Understand where your partners are in their business lifecycle. Mature businesses with good reputations likely have a lower risk associated with them than new businesses with less experience.
- Check in with your gut and decide if the risk feels too scary or manageable. If on the edge, consider waiting for a bit to see if passion for the idea holds and the risk therefore seems manageable.
- Look for gaps in the marketplace that can be easily filled with minimal investment. COVID-19 stopped the Taste of Gros Morne from offering their food tours, so pivoted to launch Gros Morne picnics at minimal cost.
- Look for funding opportunities to reduce the financial risks associated with an investment. While the tourism sector has offered a number of funding programs, look beyond tourism for grants and funding related to things such as technology upgrades, wellness improvements, accessibility grants, etc.
- Search industry/association, provincial, and national websites for grants and funding opportunities. If a not-for-profit, check out various agencies and foundations for grant opportunities.
- Keep up to date with how the market is changing. The national, provincial and regional tourism associations are an excellent source for reliable information on changing consumer sentiment as well as general industry trends.
- Local and regional marketing organizations can also be very helpful in amplifying a business' marketing efforts / investment.

"The advise of the Tourism Café to 'do what you do best and partner for the rest' resulted in partnerships being a key strategy for us to reduce the risks associated with new ventures."

– Ian Stone

Additional Helpful Links

[Canada United small business relief fund](#) for adoption of digital technology to move business online

[Ontario Trillium Foundation](#) provides grants for the non-profit sector

Disclaimer: In providing your business with the information above and other support or advice, including information, support and/or advice relating to the Covid-19 crisis, the Tourism Café and RTO8 session sponsors and topic specialists are not responsible or liable for decisions made, strategies adopted or third party program results, and specifically disclaim any responsibility for any consequences, financial or otherwise, of a business relying on our advice or using the information we provide. Businesses must understand and agree that they are responsible for all actions they take and decisions they make, and must do their due diligence and seek appropriate legal, accounting, tax or other professional advice as they may require.