

BUILDING THE EXPERIENCE

Product Development – Packages & Experiences

What is product development, and what's the difference between **packages** and **experiences**? Product development includes all the ways businesses and destination marketing organizations enhance a tourism commodity like a room, a meal, an activity, etc., to add value for the consumer. Historically, the tourism industry has marketed packages which are a single priced offering of a group of products such as lodging, meals, sightseeing activities, museums, outdoor recreation, sports, special events, and so on. Packaging focuses on combining the specific products you can usually purchase individually in a destination.

Packaging

In building a traditional package, industry providers bundle products. They look at a visitor segment that enjoys a specific activity or amenity and put that together with a place to stay, the activity, an event, and sometimes meals or other products.

It is generally not the hotel room, the bedding, the room service, the formal dining room or the balcony with a view that brings people back to a destination again and again. As important as those products are to personal comfort and satisfaction, it is more often the experience of meeting an interesting local, being immersed in a spectacular landscape, photographing a sunrise from a majestic mountaintop vista – those experiences that take root in both memory and emotion and compel guests to return.

Carefully crafted experiences capture the hearts and souls of visitors and help them to connect with an indigenous way of life, a unique local culture, a special geography, a personal story, an historic event, etc. that grips the imagination, stirs emotions and creates a personal connection within the visitor. The experience that creates an emotional connection becomes the memory that goes home with them and lives forever in their hearts and minds.

That connection equates to the way a guide personally took the time to carefully show you how to choose the proper fly, match it to the hatch, and securely tie it to your line, then patiently taught you how to cast again and again. After seemingly endless tries, you caught both the idea and that beautiful trout! Then he/she cooked that fish over the open fire showing you how to prepare it and add appropriate side dishes best suited to your outstanding meal. Then your guide shared the luscious goodness of that meal while pointing out the stars and constellations of the night sky while sharing personal stories of exploits about nature in the wild. That entire experience and the emotions you felt on that adventure live on in memory and pull you back to that special time over the years causing a deep longing to return and do it all over again.

An exceptional visitor experience thoughtfully combines physical assets – such as a building, a transport van, a boat – in a specific location with emotional interactions that create energy, awe, amazement, introspection. Exceptional experiences live on long after guests have left the physical premises.

The experience taps into uniqueness of places, people, stories and traditions through a common interest. Collaborations with small business or cultural sectors create an experience where a level of personalization is possible, along with showcasing unique authentic local gems. Though some elements are always the same, the emotional reactions and memories will always be slightly different in each individual experience.

Experiential visitation is built around impactful, sometimes life changing, meaning and value.

Value: the pricing reflects products, goods, services and experiences in combination, which is unique and cannot be duplicated. Thus, when creating experiences, businesses compete on the value of the experience and not on price.

Events: Celebrating a Destination's Culture and Driving Visitation

Historically, one of the most important things that a destination has done is to create signature events that draw visitors to experience something unique to local culture and offers great economic benefit to the destination. Events provide an opportunity for fun, food, education, entertainment and to bring residents and visitors together around a common shared experience. Additionally, well-planned events create a critical revenue stream for the lead organization.



Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, large-scale events are not happening in the usual way in the short term. However, this is an opportune time to be planning for new concepts that promote the image and culture of your community and have potential for growth over time. An event might begin as a virtual event and develop into a live gathering later, when the current situation normalizes. Or there may be room in the future organizational business plan for both virtual and live events.



An event provides only one time each year to prove to organizers that the planning was sufficient, that the marketing effort hit the target, and whether the concept was appealing or not. Flaws will show up very quickly as the event unfolds and the successes will be just as readily evident!

Remember: In business, the general rule is that it takes five years to expect a substantial return on investment. Expect no less time for growing and fine-tuning a successful event, in fact it probably will take longer. A new event is a start-up business!

Creating an event is very similar to creating a new business in the following ways:

- **Initial research is critical to finding a unique niche that resonates with community, regional culture, and target markets.**
- **Successful, lasting events usually begin small and grow over time.**
- **A carefully crafted “business plan” with staged growth should be developed specifically for an event.**

- **A detailed budget must accompany the business plan to insure viability.**
- **Flexibility and contingencies must be built into all the plans and planning.**
- **Practice constant evaluation and adjustment with public and vendor input (surveys) each year.**
- **Exercise consistency and patience over a period of years if goals, measurements, and growth is obvious.**
- **Determine community/destination capacity.**

Getting Organized

The organizing group should represent a cross-section of the community. Begin with key people who have the most to gain from success. Subcommittees can bring in residents with less at stake, but interest in volunteering and camaraderie. The overall planning committee should be around 15 people to allow for delegation of tasks.



Tip: If there is an established group that will benefit from your event concept, with engagement they can help with tasks, marketing, and your ultimate success.

Great Example: The International Seaplane Fly-in, now 43 years successful, was developed by a local business around the International Seaplane Pilots Association – a membership of pilots who love to get together, fly, compete, learn the latest in technology and talk about all things having to do with seaplanes. Moosehead Lake is the largest seaplane base in the East. Seaplanes continue to be a thrilling part of the heritage of northern Maine, which started with bush pilots transporting sports into the back country for hunting and fishing excursions long before roads existed. The fly-in event was never intended to be a spectator event, but was always planned

- **for pilots, to celebrate the heritage of their passion; and**
- **to stretch the summer season one more weekend beyond Labor Day.**



Think about other successful events with great longevity like the Lobster Festival, Clam Festival, Blueberry Festival, among others. These are indigenous to Maine culture and heritage each with an industry that supports the harvesting, production, distribution and marketing of these products, which helps make these events so successful.

Some DMOs have created highly successful events that have stood the test of time and have added to the organization's bottom line and sustainability. Consider the Whoopie Pie Festival in Dover-Foxcroft that grew to serve thousands of people in a single day event celebrating a well-loved Maine food item. The Kennebunk-Kennebunkport Chamber of Commerce has also been very successful with their Christmas Prelude event over the past several years. It is a shoulder

season event in a traditionally known summer destination that draws people to the community to celebrate the holiday season.

Whether planning a live event or a virtual event, there are some similar steps involved in the process.

A very large live event should follow a timeline that spans no less than 12 months and possibly as many as 24 to be properly prepared, especially if the marketing is expected to attract thousands from out-of-state. Logistics for a big live entertainment event requires a professional level of detail.



Virtual events, on the other hand, can be developed much more quickly and often prove to be successful in reaching a broader audience. Technology tools must be in place and well tested with practiced users to make these events successful. Technology for virtual events is constantly changing, therefore it is important to engage in careful research to be certain the tools you choose match your organizational needs. In recent months, many organizations are taking their critical fundraising efforts online with significant success.

The chart below is very high level but shows some of the common elements of planning for both types of events.

Planning a Live or Virtual Event

- **Pre-planning**
 - **Locations, times, entertainment, sponsors, incentives, website, forms, videos, solicit for needs, etc.**
- **Determine Site Location**
- **Support Services *(only live event)***
 - **Medical care**
 - **Security**
 - **Weather contingency plans**
 - **Liability insurance**
 - **Parking plan**
 - **Recruit and train volunteers**
- **Communications Plan**
 - **Determine social platform**
 - **Promotional calendar**
 - **Invitations**
- **Establish a Budget**
- **Determine & Test Technology Tools**
- **Establish Sub-committees:**
 - **Promotion and Publicity**
 - **Entertainment**
 - **Food and Beverage**
 - **Fundraising**
 - **Arts/Crafts/Local Traditions *(only live event)***
 - **Children's Area *(only live event)***

- **Post Event Wrap-up**
 - **Thank sponsors and donors**
 - **Volunteer appreciation**
 - **Share results – what went right, what didn't, economic impact**

Attention to detail is the mantra in planning any event, whether live, virtual or a hybrid. Two of the biggest mistakes that event planners make are:

- 1) allowing too little time to plan and just jumping into the event;**
- 2) not paying attention to the smallest of details so that absolutely nothing is left to guesswork.**

Pop-ups and Activities

Other types of “events” that have gained in popularity over the past few years are **pop-ups**. They tend to be smaller in scale and are organized in a shorter time frame. Every pop-up event is unique and serves a different purpose and audience. Examples include:

- **Belfast Dinner on the Bridge**
- **Lost Kitchen Saturday Market and Lunch in Freedom**

Evaluate the Success of Your Event

An event, just like any other business, needs to be evaluated and/or invigorated to remain in touch with current consumer trends and expectations. Annual surveys and evaluations from all participants – entertainers, participants, audience, vendors, volunteers, etc. – will inform organizers regarding whether they are keeping their audiences engaged and satisfied on every level.



As part of the post event wrap-up, it is essential to evaluate your success. This can often be accomplished by answering just a few questions such as:

- **Did you reach your visitation goals?**
- **Did you increase followers and engagement from previous year? Utilize social media/Google analytics to determine audience engagement.**
- **Did your volunteer base increase? Decrease?**
- **Did you meet your projected earnings?**
- **Did revenue increase from previous year? Decrease?**
- **Did you meet your sponsorship goals?**
- **If goals were not met, what were the factors? And how can you adjust for the next year if this is an annual event?**

If the interest of your event seems to be waning and attendance and revenues are consistently on the decline, it may be time to revamp the schedule to create renewed interest, or it may be the

time to consider eliminating this event in lieu of another activity. Some events, not grounded in local culture, may have a shorter lifespan.

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OTHER FUNCTIONS OF A DMO

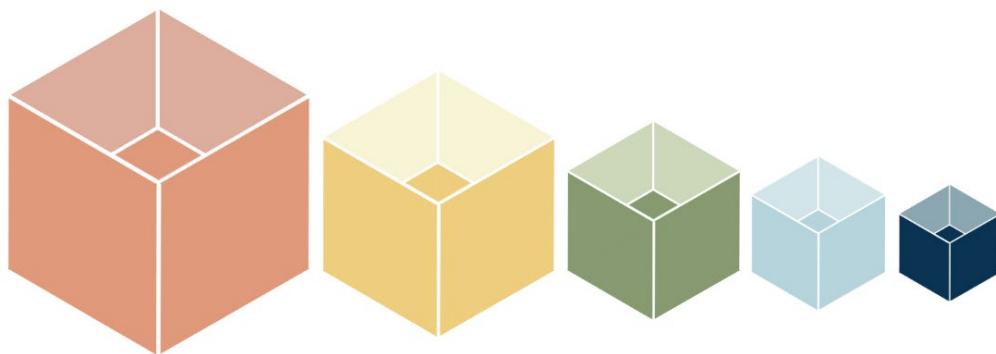
Visitor Information and Managing the Experience

Marketing is the inspiration that drives people to travel and is the primary function of a DMO, but the information about the destination is the “glue” that holds together the entire travel experience from beginning to end no matter how near or far visitors travel

Carefully developed visitor information, often referenced as collateral (brochures, rack cards, maps, etc.) is one of the critical pieces for managing the destination experience.

Visitor Information System

In the visitor information system, there are layers of services that could be likened to those nesting boxes often used to entertain young children. Visitor information services exist at various levels that must all be coordinated – each designed to fit within the layer above it – both in informational content and for distribution to the potential consumer.



This results in a large and complex system of information distribution but is critical for a satisfactory outcome from a visitor perspective. The visitor should be able to enter the informational network at any level depending upon their previous research or familiarity with the destination. No matter where the visitor enters the system, statewide information should be available.



Nationally – BrandUSA



Multi-state organizations – Discover New England, Travel South



Statewide – ME Office of Tourism, Statewide industry associations (such as Hospitality Maine, Maine Tourism Association, Maine Campground Owners Association, etc.)



Regionally – Eight (8) regional tourism marketing organizations in Maine

Locally – chambers of commerce, CVBs, DMOs, Main Street organizations, and related service businesses contribute to visitor information as advertisers, providers and users of information services. Often, the professionals on the local level help to create the websites, maps, guidebooks, apps, etc., but they also distribute materials from their businesses as appropriate to their guests needs. Information services are a partnership between the business community and the Visitor Information Center.

- **Accommodations: hotel, motel, B&Bs, etc.**
- **Guided services**
- **Tour operators**
- **Travel agents**
- **On- and off-line publishers of visitor information**
- **Chambers of commerce, CVBs, DMOs, Main Street organizations**
- **Visitor information staff**

Local Tourism Suppliers Need:

- **Reliable information about visitor services**
- **Current information on events and activities**
- **Confidence to speak with guests using dependable, current information**

Local Tourism Suppliers Want:

- **To satisfy visitors needs quickly**
- **Ability to match guest expectations with appropriate experiences**
- **To be viewed as a reliable source**
- **To earn the trust of their customers**

Managing the Visitor Experience in the Destination

Managing the visitor experience in the destination begins with the first visitor contact with a destination on any level from state to local, which may be via the website, text, email, chat, social media, phone or, on rare occasions, through the mail system. That initial contact is usually an important part of the final decision-making process for the potential customer and will help them determine if they will choose this destination or another. Never underestimate the power of the initial contact, attitude and timeliness of the feedback and information provided.

An attitude of friendliness, knowledgeability, sincerity, and helpfulness in this interaction has the power to gain the customer in this early decision-making stage.

When visitors arrive at their chosen destination, they are often overwhelmed and confused by multiple activity options and almost too much information. They often seek out a Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) staff person at the Visitor Information Center to help them sort through the clutter and to respond to their many questions. The DMO staff can help initiate a positive destination experience by asking appropriate questions to determine the visitor's wants and needs and by making recommendations that are appropriate to their situation.

Initial Visitor Needs:

- **Maps, guidebooks and directions**
- **Public rest rooms**
- **Accessible facilities information**
- **Transportation Information (public/private)**
- **Locations of ATMs, banks, currency exchange**
- **Interpreters (occasionally)**

Visitor Expectations:

- **A mobile-friendly website that is up to date**
- **Friendly & knowledgeable, staff**
- **Inspiration to explore & Authentic experiences**
- **Recommendations that are suited to their specific interests**

Visitor Information Centers

Visitor Information Centers (VICs), also known as Welcome Centers, play a huge role in orienting visitors to a destination. VICs are often staffed and can personalize information for the visitor in terms of their specific interests, such as arts, recreation, history, dining, etc.

The VIC is often the first stop upon entry and is usually equipped to meet several visitor needs. Some VICs also have picnic areas, play areas, walking trails, vending machines, local products, etc. These amenities help visitors unwind from their trip while they also orient themselves to a new destination.



VICs should always provide:

- **Quality, current, accurate visitor information**
- **Kiosks or available information, even when closed**
- **Map of the destination**
- **Activities guide**
- **Friendly, warm, welcoming service**

Some visitors will return to the VIC multiple times during a longer stay in a destination. That is a signal that the VIC staff is doing its job well and has gained the trust and confidence of the visitor. All critical decisions are not made on the first day of vacation. Activity options are often determined later, after the party gets settled and requires more detailed guidance.

VIC Operations Questions to Consider

What is the policy for accepting collateral into the VIC?

Only for members?

Only for tourism businesses?

Free for any business?

Monthly charge for businesses outside of tourism?

How does the VIC provide after-hours information?

What staff and volunteer training programs are necessary?

Has a budget been prepared?

Is there a business plan in place?

Information Technology

Travelers may arrive in destination at any time of the day or night. It is important to have some basic information available to them outside of regular business hours. Touch screen kiosks are one device that can be a helpful tool to provide information services after hours. Many kiosks have direct phone lines to connect visitors with lodging or other services.

As more and more travelers rely on their mobile devices for information, it is important for them to easily find businesses and information centers. DMOs and businesses should claim their business on [Google](#) and be sure their facility is properly listed on Google Maps.

Mobile apps can also help visitors navigate a destination area. Because systems vary, visitors should be made aware of any charges they might incur from the use of a mobile app. Most apps are free to the user and paid for by industry guides, hotels, and/or activity providers with whom the visitor interfaces.

Information Summary

- **Access to information throughout their visit is the ultimate key to visitor satisfaction.**
- **The DMO can facilitate the flow of information from destination products and service providers to visitors.**
- **DMO VICs are an important additional form of marketing for the tourism industry.**
- **VICs provide information but can also be a location to provide other goods and services.**
- **Technology can assist with after-hours information.**
- **Mobile apps can be useful as visitors move about a destination**

Making Visitor Centers Sustainable

VICs cost money to staff and operate. In a four-season destination area that operation can be a year-round effort that involves most of the things required to operate any office or home, including plowing in winter, sanding, trash removal, air conditioning or fans, and much more. To service both visitors and tourism businesses, revenue must be raised to supply all the needs of the center on an ongoing basis.

The reality is that if destination marketing organizations are to be successful, they will always have to look for innovative ways to draw visitors to their destinations and in doing so, they must also be creative in developing revenue streams from those activities.

Some Revenue Generation Questions to Consider?

- Can you charge a commission by booking hotels, attractions, etc.?

- Can you charge a commission by packaging and selling attraction packages?

- Can you plan and implement special events that will produce income?

- Do you have the capacity to create and execute a signature event?

- Can you be a source for small meetings services?

- Can you manage and charge local businesses for cooperative programs?

- Can you sell maps, posters, guidebooks, etc. for a profit?

- Can you sell local art and handcrafted items and charge a commission to the artists?

- Can you charge local businesses for visitor survey data?

Can you offer and sell local tour guiding services?

Can you offer and sell refreshments or set up a vending machine?

Can you charge visitors and others for photocopying, email and internet use?

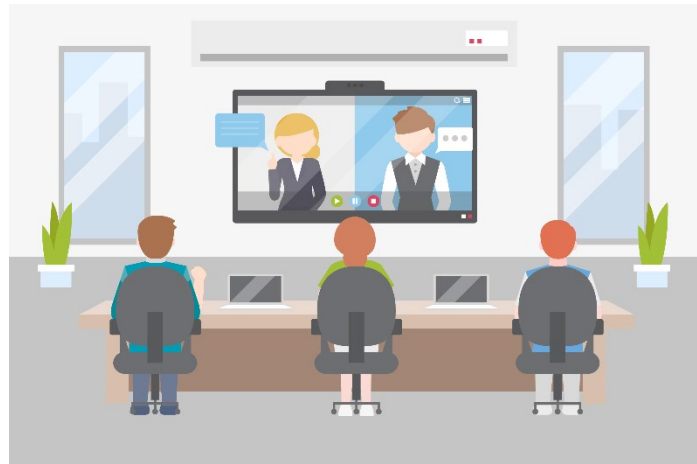
A few considerations in VIC site location:

- **Best located on the right side of the road for easy access from the vehicular travel lane; this location also allows vehicles to re-enter traffic without crossing lanes which is much safer on a busy street or roadway.**
- **If there is a key decision point from a travel perspective, the VIC should be located before that point so people don't travel far out of their intended way inadvertently.**
- **Plenty of parking space is required for SUVs hauling boats on trailers, large RVs often pulling cars, snowmobile trailers and seasonal equipment, etc.**
- **Some communities offer small, seasonal satellite VICs in high foot-traffic areas where visitors may go with additional questions while they are shopping.**
- **Carefully placed kiosks with collateral materials may supplement information services offered in the VIC throughout a large region.**

If your destination does not have a Visitor Information Center in place, you may need to consider finding partners, shared space, or embark on a feasibility study to determine location, traffic, and potential usage for a center of your own. This should not be viewed as a “build it and they will come” endeavor.

DMO as Contact for Small Meetings

Though meetings may look slightly different in the future as the result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many DMOs do function as the first point of contact for meeting planners who are seeking a physical venue for small meetings. Even with pandemic restrictions in place, a fifty in-person small meeting is still a viable possibility with proper social distancing, face coverings and hand sanitizing. Small DMOs often participate in introducing meeting planners to facility managers, helping with site visits, and the proposal stage until a facility is chosen. Then the facility or sales manager steps in when a contract seems imminent.



Qualifying Clients

Not every meeting or event is appropriate for a destination or for certain facilities, therefore it is important for efficiency that potential customers are “qualified” by the DMO in the initial contact. The qualifying process takes place by asking the meeting planner a series of open-ended questions. Following are some of the questions one might ask initially to help build a profile for the event:

- **When selecting a venue, what is most important to you?**
- **Could you tell me a little about the people who attend this event and what they will expect?**
- **At your last meeting, what were some of the things that went very well?**
- **What were some of the things that did not go well that you would like to avoid?**
- **What type of theme were you envisioning?**
- **What is the most important part of your event?**
- **What was the number of attendees at your last meeting?**
- **Where did you hold your previous meeting?**
- **Who is the primary contact?**
- **Will break-out space be required? If so, how many spaces for approximately how many people per group?**
- **How much free time are attendees allowed in your agenda?**
- **What do attendees like to do when they are not in meetings?**

There are many questions such as these that help to determine if this meeting/event is a fit for the specific destination. The responses to these questions help eliminate certain facilities and determine which properties deserve a site visit.

If the DMO chooses to get involved with live meetings and events, staff training is critical to ensure that staffers understand the steps in the meeting process and are completely qualified to

be the first point of contact. This will help ensure that the destination does not lose this important business segment.

Meeting work requires the staff of the DMO to become fully familiar with all possible meeting sites throughout the community and have detailed information to answer initial questions correctly. Meeting business can be lucrative and fill an off-season gap for facilities, so a well-trained, knowledgeable team is especially important.

Revenue for DMO Services

At times, there may be a role for the DMO to handle key elements of a meeting, such as welcome bags, registration, VIP gifts, tours, transportation services, etc. Aspects of the event might be handled by DMO staff to assist the planner and bring revenues to the DMO at the same time. For example, providing registration services can offer the DMO a revenue stream and ease the burden on the planner. Involvement depends upon the situation, but the goal of DMO staff should always be to make a positive impression on the event organizers so that they are inclined to bring business back to the community and facility in the future.

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