



*The National Voice of Scenic Byways & Roads*

# **MONTHLY MARKETING TOOLBOX**

## **Unit Two**

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## MONTHLY MARKETING TOOLBOX

Welcome to Unit Two of the Monthly Marketing Toolbox. Each month we are looking at a different aspect of destination marketing and illustrating how it applies to real world situations. This approach enables you to use the material to transform your own destination or Byway marketing.

This month we're focusing on Step Two, a Destination Assessment, what, in business parlance, would be called a "Situational Analysis." Before you can begin to make changes in your own operations and priorities, you need to know the current situation in your organization and destination marketing and Byway organizations in the surrounding region. In essence, these destinations and Byways become "competitors" when visitors have the option to choose their experiences instead of the experiences you are offering. It's also very important to learn the visitor segments that others in your area are serving and how they are being served. All of the information you gain can be used to contribute to the future success of your destination.



## **DISCOVER THE EXPERIENCES VISITORS HAVE AVAILABLE TO THEM**

Two lesser known facts about travel in the United States are: 75% of all visitors come from within a 200 mile radius surrounding your destination or Byway, and 85% of all trips are taken by car. In fact, the higher the household income in the US, the more likely that leisure trips are taken in the family car. Thus, understanding what experiences are available to visitors within the 200 mile radius surrounding your destination or Byway is critically important.

In addition, it is important to keep in mind that experiences are about so much more than product and price. They include emotional components, individualized participation, and intangible components, such as the effective of brand perception. Each of these elements can be used to create uniqueness, in your own offerings and those in surrounding areas. As more destinations compete online, the market is being saturated with all kinds of experiences. Unless your offerings are a completely new invention, they will not be the only fish in the pond. This, it is very important to fully understand the visitors who participate in your offerings, and those who visit surrounding destinations and how the organizations delivering these experiences interact with them.

Completing a very detailed analysis of the experience offerings in the radius surrounding your destination or Byway Corridor will be most beneficial to planning future marketing actions and even organizational changes that will make your organization and offerings more effective. When researching, I caution against using only traditional methods like positioning maps, pricing analysis, and other methods used to simplify competitive research. Most are intended to shorthand the time it takes to compile the information. These methods are not nearly adequate to really understand how the destinations and Byways deal with their visitors. Experiences are just too multi-dimensional to be reduced to a diagram in two dimensions on one piece of paper.

Plus, the real value of detailed analysis is that you will be able to put your own experience offerings, marketing and organization through the same process to reveal how things compare other offerings available to visitors.

At the end of the entire research process, your organization should have answers to:

What makes a visitor choose another destination or Byway over ours? Another region, another attraction, another resort, or another show?

Why would visitors go to another location further away, instead of enjoying what is offered closer to home?

Why have visitor numbers at surrounding destinations and Byways increased, while ours have stayed the same?

Which of the results discovered in the analysis seem out of whack when comparing all regional offerings?

How can, or should, our own actions be evaluated and re-aligned to achieve the same or a higher level of success?

The key to answering these questions is to really understand what is really going on that is generated by a roll up the sleeves, hands on, digging in every possible corner, totally engaged approach. Understanding what other destinations and Byways in your region are offering – and what they are likely going to do in the future – will enable you to compete in years to come.

Don't be afraid to ask the hard questions and don't stress out when the answers are not necessarily favorable. Consider at least you have answers and can use them to start making changes. Thoroughness in the analysis will produce true insights, point out your organization's competitive advantage of, and can reveal even small changes that can make a huge difference in overall future results.

I don't recommend having others do the research for your organization, because it is never as effective as when the organization is directly involved. A hands on approach renders the benefit of insights that might be missed by others who don't understand the nuances of your organization's offerings as well as the actual task activities needed to promote and produce them. Keep in mind that results are going to vary greatly by overall organizational budget and size. Results are also significantly impacted by marketing programs, which can make as much of a difference as unique experience offerings do.

## **Getting Started**

Prepare a spreadsheet with the names of destinations and Byways in your radius on the vertical axis and columns for the various characteristics you will be evaluating, across the horizontal axis. Begin the research using publically available information: websites, annual

reports, marketing plans, and other materials that organizations publish. There are available automated tools that can be used to analyze the website activity of competitors, social media and other information.

## **Websites**

Beginning with the website of each destination and Byway in the region, critical questions include:

- Is the website customer friendly?
- Is it mobile friendly?
- Is there a clearly presented story?
- Is the organization's primary value to customers well explained?
- Are pre-defined experiences readily apparent?
- Are visitors able to customize those experiences?
- Is there adequate copy on the website that describes the experiences?
- Is there direct booking capability?
- Are there descriptions of related activities and attractions?
- Is there specific information about related services?
- Is there a phone number?
- Is live chat available?
- Can marketing materials be ordered through a simple form?
- Is there a newsletter?
- Is there a blog?
- Are there plenty of images?
- Are the images dramatic and descriptive?
- Is video included?
- Is the website easy to get around in?
- When first accessing the website, is there logic to what to do next?

## **Moving on to other documents that are normally found online:**

- Can print marketing materials be downloaded rather than ordered?
- Does engaging editorial describe the overall approach and philosophy of the organization?
- Is there engaging editorial that describes each of the available experiences?
- Is the value delivered to visitors clearly explained?
- What markets do the images appeal to?
- Are the text and images aligned with the target markets?
- What type of experiences do the materials emphasize?
- What are the location's primary attraction and activity drivers?

**If the marketing plans of area destinations and Byways are available:**

- Does each destination and Byway have a discernable marketing strategy?
- Is there an integrated marketing communications plan?
- Is social media integrated or an add-on to communications?
- What are the key markets and specific visitors segments well targeted?
- Do marketing programs appear to be well aligned with these target segments?
- Are responses to the psychographics, needs and priorities of visitors well thought out?
- Does the organization understand what job their offering is intended to do – what the main value of the offerings are to visitors?
- Is there a public relations effort?
- Is there a separate sales plan?
- Are marketing and sales coordinated?
- Are media and social media coordinated?

**Continuing to assess the overall approach to visitors:**

- Is the destination brand authentic or contrived?
- Does the tagline say something meaningful?
- Does the location communicate anything distinctive about itself?
- Can the unique selling proposition or competitive advantage be determined?
- Are their specific digital campaigns for specific segments?

**Scope of social media:**

- What is the scope of social media platforms in use?
- How many followers, fans, etc, for each social media platform?
- Is there an emphasis placed on direct customer engagement?
- Are social media comments being answered?
- Is there opportunity to post videos?

**Experience offerings:**

- Are there tours available?
- How many?
- Have wineries and breweries, culinary experiences, farms, or other asset categories been developed into pre-designed trails and experiences?
- Are there itineraries describing the “best” experience?

Are these offerings apparent to visitors when they enter the website?  
Does the location hold a constant series of events?  
Are there heritage festivals?  
Are special events and festivals promoted?  
Are tickets and information available on the website?

### **In regard to staff:**

How many staff overall are employed?  
In what positions?  
Is there a position devoted to digital marketing?  
Are sales and marketing combined into one position?  
Do staff positions have outdated titles?

### **Digging Beneath the Surface**

After recording everything readily available you can find about each regional destination and Byway, it's time to dig into more substantive information.

The most important thing to understand about any destination or Byway is the value that visitors perceive in the experiences others offer and the importance of that value to visitors. If the value proposition of a destination or Byway is not be readily apparent, it may take significant research to discover.

Once you determine the core value proposition—the very essence of what is offered to visitors— of a destination or Byway, it is much easier to compare your own value proposition to others:

What are points of parity?  
What features do your experiences share with other surrounding destinations and Byways?  
What are the major points of difference in competing value propositions?  
What features are important to your visitors that are not available from others?  
What features do other experiences have that visitors do not regard as important?

The second most important thing to understand is how do surrounding destinations and Byways transform their value proposition into a unique selling proposition -- the core of all their marketing communications.

## **Investigating Reviews**

Next, work to investigate how each destination or Byway's visitors feel about them. Check online reviews from every available source you can identify.

What words do visitors use to describe the offerings and experiences of visitors surrounding your area?

How do the words align with the unique selling proposition the destination or Byway is trying to get across?

Do visitors believe that value is being offered?

Is it the same value the organization believes is important?

Do visitors believe the destination or Byway is really offering a different value proposition than the organization believes it is?

What are the benefits that visitors consider unique, and not just more or cheaper, that differentiate the organization?

Are the negatives you find in the reviews about surrounding experiences reflected in marketing communications or even answered online?

If possible, interview visitors who go to surrounding destinations and Byways, whether in online conversations or in person.

## **Explore Surrounding Destinations and Byways in Person**

The next step is to experience each surrounding offering in person. Purchase experiences and participate in them. Take the tours, watch the shows. If you can't do that because you are too well known, have a surrogate do so. Experience the traffic and wayfinding. Become a secret shopper. Eat in restaurants. Attend festivals and events. Shop in the retail stores. Get to know the offerings first hand, the value they offer to customers, and determine WHY they are succeeding or failing. As you purchase offerings, diagram the buying journey in detail. This will be invaluable to compare to the diagram you prepare for your organization's own process.

As you experience your purchases, assess the level and quality offered. Try obtaining a refund, returning a product, or cancelling a service. What kind of reaction did you get? Try changing a reservation to a different date, change the type of purchase you made, and request more personalization. Assess what was successful and what was not from your viewpoint as a visitor.

## **Customer Service**

Put customer service people through their paces (nicely of course) and see how they perform.

How empowered are customer service people, and when did the scope of the problem you were trying to solve get elevated to the next level?

Were they able to issue refunds quickly, without having to go through several layers of bureaucracy?

Were conditions and additional costs imposed on changes in reservations?

Were customer service people clearly not happy about having to make changes, make refunds, or otherwise modify the original transaction?

As you secret shop, be sure to analyze the strength of each experience and how you feel about the relationship of the brand to the real substance each destination and Byway is offering. Many locations are plagued with brands established decades ago that have no relationship to their current offerings. Others have brands that actually work against the organic search words that visitors are using to find them. Brands that appear generic or “pasted on” do absolutely nothing to strengthen and support experiences, while those which have authentically risen from the very soul of the organization have real impact, and make a huge contribution to success.

## **Discover The Sales Process of Surrounding Offerings**

After the in person research, you will be conversant enough with each experience and sales process to determine how the whole process flows, and what it looks like.

What sales channels are they using?

Do they have multiple locations that give them an advantage?

Do they have partner reselling programs?

Is remarketing in place, generating marketing messages to remind you of their product when you are on other websites?

Do they regularly discount their offerings?

How involved are sales people in the process, if at all?

Work to determine if the sales are increasing, or if competitors are downsizing, going through some type of marketing transition, introducing new offerings or changing anything else. Paralleling the responses to the customer service questions with changes in sales will begin to illustrate how the two aspects correlate.

## **Evaluate Content Marketing**

Analyze the content used to describe experiences:

Is it accurate?

How in-depth is it?

How valuable was it to making a purchase?

How well did it describe the offering?

What was the tone of voice used?

Did it sound hollow and professionally prepared to serve as a sales pitch, or was it authentic, likely prepared by in-house personnel who really know the experience?

Do the communications resonate with the intended recipients to prompt an actual purchase?

Is the psychographic information the messages are based on emerge loud and clear?

## **Analyze Staff/Budget Ratios**

Try to determine the ratio of budget that surrounding destinations are spending on staff and administration vs. what they are actually spending on marketing programs – as a benchmark as to how effective those programs are.

## **Tie Down Target Markets Being Pursued**

At this point in the process, you should be able to accurately determine the specific markets that surrounding destinations and Byways are targeting to compare the target markets with those targeted by your organization.

As you investigate every possible aspect of the surrounding offerings, record all the information on the spreadsheets you set up earlier. Analyze the strengths and weaknesses of each competitor, the things that they are especially good at and places where they need improvement.

## **Comparing Your Organization's Own Metrics**

Now, to take a look at your own results, “numbers” or “metrics,” create one last column on the spreadsheet to record information about your own organization in each category on which surrounding destinations and Byways were analyzed. Be honest and brutal, since accurate comparisons clearly illustrate the differences, shortcomings, unique qualities, and places that need shoring up. Most importantly, the data will point out where your

organization is unique and can exploit strategic advantages. When specific information can be benchmarked, the environment in which your organizations must operate becomes truly clear. Only then will the real answers emerge.

### **Electronic Tools to Analyze Digital Marketing**

In today's electronically driven world, it is imperative to be conversant with analytic tools that reveal a complete picture of digital marketing for your organization and others.

Google Analytics, the simplest and most robust analytics offering in the marketplace, is used by over 50% of the world's top 10,000 websites. But, that's only the starting place. This completely free tool lets you see where website visitors are coming from, what they do while on your site, and how often they come back. It also shows, among other things, the key words site visitors are using to find the site, which can be evaluated against the key words that other destinations and Byways are using.

Create a spreadsheet with categories for every type of analysis that is obtained from each of the analytics platforms. Track changes in each category on a monthly basis. There is no need to spend hundreds or thousands of dollars on digital marketing analysis. There are a myriad of platforms, apps and tools to do so, that are free or low cost. After employing all those tools, if there are still places where data appears scant or missing, add a paid tool that is most effective in that particular area.

## **TOOL FOR STEP TWO: DESTINATION ASSESSMENT**

Armed with all of the information collected in the analysis of destinations and Byways in a 200 mile radius surrounding your destination, it's time to use a time tested traditional tool to solidify the comparisons between your organization's offerings, experiences and practices and those of locations that visitors to your destination have available to them to choose instead.

A SWOT analysis is an honest assessment of organizational strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that can be enhanced as information comes in from analysis of the competitive set.

Strengths and weaknesses compared to local destinations and Byways and an additional set of similar locations across the US, will point out if the existing structure, culture and resources of the organization as compared to others, point out opportunities and constraints on achieving future goals and objectives. An effective SWOT analysis will also point out areas that must be enhanced before new programs can be put in place, and marketing operations changed and new and enhanced experiences delivered.

The strengths of your organization include service quality, customer loyalty, flexibility, innovativeness, creativity, depth of experience, and access to markets.

Weaknesses include funding structure, operational issues, inexperience with a transformational experience offering, low profitability of offerings, and snafus in promotion.

Opportunities include the proper timing transformational experience offerings introduction, tools to obtain visitor input, a segment of the market that is being currently overlooked, and surrounding destinations that are not responding to customer needs.

Threats include newly emerging competitors, a lagging overall economy, and suppliers that are not holding up quality.



## Research with Key Stakeholders

In addition to the above analysis, it will be important to conduct research with key stakeholders in your organization and area to determine the effective ideas that already exist about changing programs, offerings, experiences and the organization. Most often the best ideas come from those who are directly involved in the situation, but had not had the possibility or forum to express their thoughts.

With all the above information in hand, it will be time to proceed with your destination's or Byway's unique and original story – the competitive advantage that will attract visitors to your area, rather than somewhere else. We'll cover that in Unit 3.