



*The National Voice of Scenic Byways & Roads*

# **MONTHLY MARKETING TOOLBOX**

## **Unit Six**

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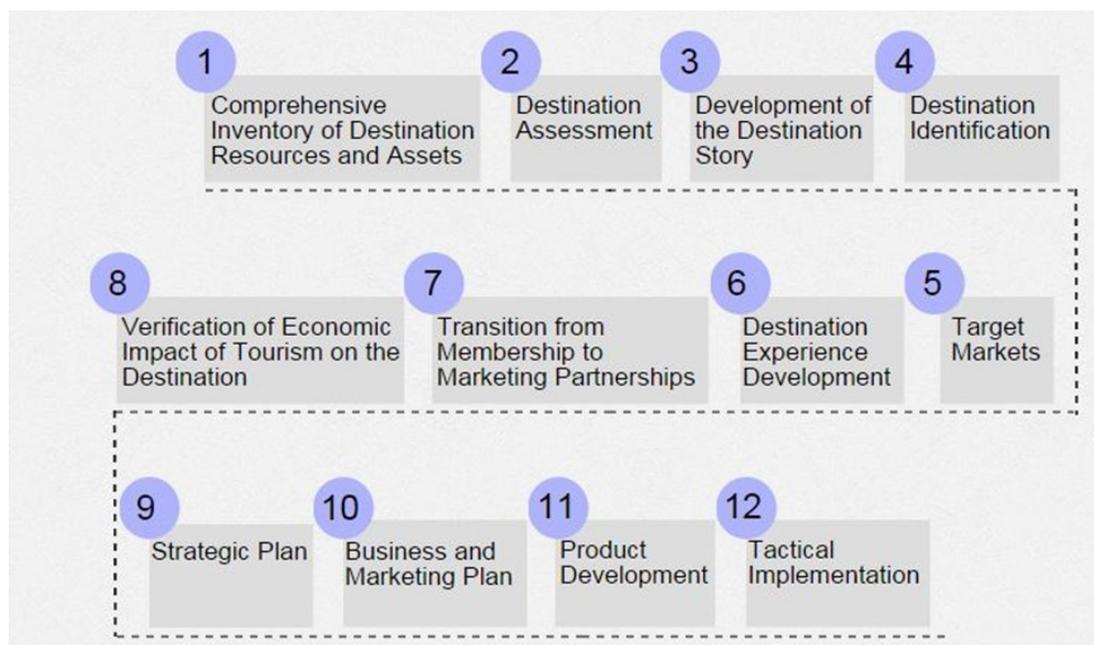
## MONTHLY MARKETING TOOLBOX

Welcome to Unit Six 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 Six: Destination Experience Development—More Than Just Patching Together A List of Possible Attractions

Today's travelers want destinations to make it as easy as possible for them to explore a new location with no hassle, make the destination experience easy to buy and, once at the destination, ensure that the destination experience easy to engage in.

The most effective destination experiences align with the needs, demands and desires of the target market segments with the strongest and highest value asset categories. Here, it is possible to combine the highest value activities, and clearly define the components of each experience. It is also a way to connect outlying resources with key areas and enhance awareness of all areas within the region.

With every experience deliver a map, coupled with actual itineraries of doable, destination experiences that travelers can print right off the website or download to their smart phones. These tools which travelers will use to organize their exploration of the destination will go a long way to promoting a visit to an unfamiliar place.



Develop, not just one, but a series of destination experiences aimed at the interests and priorities of target market segments and experiences in different durations to appeal to travelers who can only stay one or two days, as well as those who can stay longer. Hub and spoke the experiences to enable travelers to visit key resources in the surrounding area, while staying in one place. Develop experiences with several different types of accommodations.

Then, most importantly, if DMO destination professionals are well known in the community, employ a mystery shopper to take each experience – go through each experience entirely, take the tours, eat in the restaurants, drive the distances between the stops and stay in the hotels. Use the feedback appropriately

## **MADE TO ORDER MOMENTS: DESIGNING TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCES**

This month we're making an exception. Instead of providing background information and an action step at the end, we're devoting this entire unit to the development of experiences to attract today's visitors.

Traditionally, in the travel industry, the idea of customers and delivering an experience was viewed as the responsibility of individual suppliers; hotels, attractions, Bed and Breakfasts, race tracks, concert halls, and more. Yet, these locations are only components of a complete trip to a destination. Customers don't travel to stay in a hotel, take a plane trip, or rent a car. They visit to have an "EXPERIENCE," and visit particular places to experience something they cannot get elsewhere.

They eat, sleep, shop, explore, tour, and more, in an experience that is the sum total of the things they do at the destination. They never go just to patronize a supplier unless it is a special activity, and even then, that activity is normally surrounded by other services.

Few entities at the current moment have a view of the whole experience which customers have "in destination," which is made up of multiple independent suppliers generally interested only in promoting themselves – without being blended into a cohesive whole. Destinations must be able to "envision" what the region looks and acts like when a vision of what makes the best overall experience for the customer becomes a reality.

Very important questions that must be asked include:

How do we want customers to perceive our offerings and experiences?

What do we want them to do when they arrive?

How do we want them to feel when they arrive?

What do we want them to feel when they have completed the experience?

What is completely unique and authentic about our organization and our experience that will resonate with customers?

With all the attention being paid to experience, we're finally at a point where we can think about transforming the customer's experience. With your customer service experience aligned to engage customers, and your experiential marketing designed to inspire them, it is time to start transforming and changing lives. Doing so will answer Peter Drucker's next question: what do your customers value?

Customers value being swept up into an experience that lets them slip the bounds of time, truly relax, and engage their minds in something interesting enough to stop thinking about work. They want Made to Order Moments, breakthrough, astounding things, with plenty of magic to boot.

### **Made to Order Moments not Easy to Create**

Make no mistake these moments are not easy to create. If they were, every brand would have them. Plus they have to be refreshed, rethought and rejuvenated every so often so the magic does not disappear. Forbes Magazine cautions: "if you commit to creating a breakthrough transformational experience, make sure you're ready to maintain it, deepen it, and freshen it with innovative stories grounded in the original emotional values. These are the emotions that empower humanity to participate joyfully in the sorrows of the world, to begin more loving, spread peace, and cause people to see the good in each other." If we even come close to that, there will be a lot more really great experiences for customers to enjoy.

Before the current situation, the market for these experiences was certainly there. Trip Advisor indicates that nearly 70% of customers planned to try something new in the coming year. Nearly half chose their experiences based on the culture and heritage of the region they were visiting. One in three customers planned to spend more in the coming year, not because prices are rising, but because they want to have different and more unique experiences. Over 90% of Baby Boomers, who have experienced a lot of "been there, done that" were seeking additional memorable

experiences. In view of the current situation, organizations will even more so have to figure out how to deliver this magic. Time stressed and frazzled Baby Boomers will have more wellness experiences, where they detox, destress, eat healthy, and generally clean up their act for a few days while completely relaxing. Isn't that an interesting contrast to the 4 S's vacations oldsters in the industry remember!

The question becomes, how are the experiences that transform customers created? Many experience industry organizations are going to have to think wwwwaaaayyyy out of the box to do so. Get ready, you're going into the moving making business.

### **Every Great Experience Starts with a Good Story**

Telling the story of an experience is narrating the script of the experience movie you will be making. The best stories are a journey through an experience, described in a way that engages the customer's emotions, and enabling them to envision themselves in the experience. When told in an inspiring way, the story will have the pull of engagement. Participants will begin to be pulled into the story while they are still reading on the website or seeing the first marketing communication, greatly improving the prospects they will purchase. The sooner people can envision themselves having an experience the likelihood is greater that they will engage in it. When a newcomer tells a story, they stop being a stranger. When a location tells a story, it stops being a strange place. Potential visitors will relate best to a story told in first person, describing what occurs as the experience unfolds. They want to know what you liked, how the experience felt.

A recent article in the Washington Post illustrated that a story can even set one on a spiral, up or down. Couples who told more positive stories were far more likely to be together in stable marriages, than those who told negative stories. People who lead meaningful lives tend to tell stories about redemption, growth and love, and stories that move from bad to good.

Storytelling is all the buzz in many circles today, but good storytelling is not as easy as it sounds. Stories told by organizations that sell things cannot include any information that would appear to be "selling" anything. Yet, for today's organizations, where the product is words, good storytelling is survival. The author of *Storytelling That Moves People* says that, "in a story, if you can harness imagination and the principles of a well-told story, then you get people rising to their feet amid thunderous applause instead of yawning and ignoring you."

The author also recommends telling your story as if telling it to a friend, believing that this applies no matter where you are or who your audience is. Set the context of the story, the time, place, setting and other relevant descriptions, before creating action, using active verbs. Choose one ordinary moment or object and make it the “gleaming detail” that best captures the essence of the story. Make the ordinary extraordinary. Reflect on a part of the experience that originally captivated you. Dare to share emotions. There’s no way to expect experience participants to respond emotionally if there’s no emotions in the storytelling.

Choose the strongest of the five senses in the story and use it to make a deeper connection with experience participants, because one primary sense dominates every memory we have. Let the story build until it reaches a natural, emotional punchline, and then end it, quickly.

With little separation between life and work in today’s 24/7 world, engaging with a story is the only way today’s stressed out Americans can get real relaxation. Those who work with their heads and not with their hands, have to engage in a story to displace thoughts of work, for a true escape that removes both the body, and the mind, from everyday life.

When this occurs, leisure becomes not only interesting, it is recuperative and regenerating, enabling participants to relax, recharge, restore a sense of balance in life, and re-engage with themselves.

Those participants who become thoroughly engaged in a to the point where they can express it, and the experiences that goes with it, will go home and tell their friends – a level of word of mouth advertising which no static ad can ever achieve.

Have great mountain biking trails? Actually describe what it feels like to ride up and down them – the thrill, the excitement – in emotionally driven words. Have great heritage? Telling the story of the first settlers arriving at your destination – describe their conditions, however rugged they were. Have great art – stand in front of one of the best works and write the words that come to mind. Describe festivals with the smells, sights and sounds that will surround the customer. Hear the cheers, savor the smell of freshly baked goodies, mingle at the booths watching the craft! Auto racing can describe the excitement of the heat of the moment when the lead changes and the checkered flag waves! Tell it all!

With a good story in hand, there are other qualities the experience must have to have the most impact. The experience must be interpretive and immersive. The experience must take people out of their normal routines, and immerse them in a new setting. The information presented must be compelling. It must matter, or come to matter, to people on an emotional level. It must include some level of physical participation, we learn and respond best when our bodies are involved. The best experiences engage the body in ways that mirror or amplify the primary lesson of the experience. And, the experience must include an “anchor memory,” a crossing the threshold moment, shared experience, or other defining moment, that people can later use as the memory that prompts recall in the future.

### **Creating Transforming Experiences**

To begin at the very baseline, everyday life presents so many hassles, any experience that offers the prospect of leisure and relaxation must be delivered with no extra effort on the part of the participants. How can an experience delivery organization convince a potential customer to sign up for an experience that is supposed to be relaxing and effortless, if they can't figure out how to make purchase of the experience effortless?

From the first awareness on the web, what the customer learns to understand what is offered, buy the experience, and learn the details, must be totally focused on facilitating the needs of the customer. If not, they'll click out and go elsewhere. Once the experience begins, effortless delivery must continue.

Great experiences are designed to include a collection of components that all work together to provide the desired effect. For example, an experiential travel experience involves a sequence of events such as cuisine, cultural and heritage programming and other activities that transpire over time enabling the traveler to get involved and immersed in multiple dimensions surrounding a core inspiring idea, that promote a full understanding an intriguing story. Good experience designers have thought through and diagrammed the entire experience from beginning to end, to combine, sequence, and properly time a seamlessly unfolding experience.

The touchpoints of the experience have been mapped out in sequence and the process to deliver the experience at each particular touchpoint has been consciously designed to enhance the customer's experience to the greatest extent possible, coupled with a process to heighten the emotions and appeal to the senses at each touchpoint as well. Doing this may appear complex, but it is very necessary.

Design of transformational experiences is not a once and done and if the experience is multi-day or multi-dimensional, there may be the need to deal with unsavory issues like poor quality, poor attitudes, and poor service, that can exist in elements that must be combined to support the core activities.

If the experience includes related activities -- accommodations for a trip away from home, the restaurants customers eat in, the shopping they do, the roads they drive on, where they stop for gas, and even what they read while on the way. Every one of these elements has an impact on how the customer is going to relate to the transformational experience.

I am aware of some very perceptive Bed and Breakfasts who, at the basic level, aid their guests to assemble an entire experience while at their destination, mostly to manage their expectations and send them to places where they are confident a bad experience affecting their whole stay will be avoided. Good group tour operators make sure the customer's whole experience will be a good one, but there are few others in the leisure sector that even deal with baseline experience components.

### **Choreographing The Experience**

To begin to create any transformational experience, ask "how do I choreograph the emotional journey of my customers?" How do I create a narrative that takes people on a journey and makes them a part of it?"

Think of your favorite filmmaker, and the experience you are creating as a movie – intended to change people so they see themselves and the world in a new way. Ultimately, they'll see people who share their passion as friends and allies and ultimately, they'll see your brand as part of their identity, in their emotional DNA."

Further to this point, we have to ask the question: how do we shift people from being passive observers to active participants? And how do we create environments that are enjoyable and help us laugh?

Toby Bennett, Sales Director at GL Events UK, offers some of the best advice I have been able to discover about how to go about creating transformational experiences. We repeat it here and comment on it, piece by piece:

**1.Create an emotional journey.** Don't just focus on what people are going to see and read, but how they are going to feel, and how you want them to feel. Consider if you want to surprise them, inspire them, make them laugh or cry.

Unlike so many organizations that still believe customers buy their leisure experiences based on lowest price, organizations that want to attract customers to their experiences must focus on the emotions involved. That may be a tough leap for organizations that still consider their customers faceless "pax" to dealing with customers emotions. Likely they will have to change the very core of their organizations to be able to handle people as people, before moving on to consider customer's emotions.

**2.Go to as many other events and experiences as possible.** Like any design process, research is critical. Go to as many events and experiences put on by others as you can. Use these opportunities to critique the event and discover what it was trying to do and how the event or experience did in delivering what was offered. Don't just go to the sort of events that you create, but to other experiences. Get out of your comfort zone and realize that even museums and sporting events can be a fountain of inspiration for creating emotional responses.

Get geared up by participating in the experiences of your competitors to gain a better understanding of what you're up against. When you participate, look for both inspiration and ideas, as well as what "not to do." Work to determine what target markets the experiences were created for, to begin to understand the differences in market offerings.

**3.Be a storyteller.** If you want to create emotions, then tell a story. Think about your events as a dramatic theatrical production and unveil the story slowly, one piece at a time, build the moments of drama, create tension and then beautifully resolve it.

An event can be a rich source of information, and it's possible to tell your audience so many things because it's a live environment. So curate the

information is the same way one would edit a film. Allow the curation to let important pieces of information stand out and have its space.

A great experience unfolds in the same way as a movie script, only the participants are part of the cast. The entire experience in the live environment has to be planned, yet allow for serendipitous responses and interaction, allowing for development of emotional connections. The experience designer becomes the equivalent of a screenwriter, and the experience manager, the equivalent of a director. These are new roles for many organizations to incorporate and handle, but they will be very critical for success. It may be very difficult for organizations that are run by bean counters and profit margins to allow for the amount of creativity involved in transformation experience delivery. But without it, the transformations just will not happen.

**4. Think visually.** By thinking about an event as a movie will get the creative juices flowing. Take ideas and see how they look visually. Design a color palette that reflects the tone you want to set, think about iconography and imagery that can support it.

This bit of advice takes many organizations much further into aesthetics than they normally dive, working in areas that have traditionally been left to advertising agencies, because they could not effectively be handled in house. Yet, transformational experiences surround participants with a physical environment, and that environment must be thought through completely. Every element of the physical environment either contributes or detracts from the experience. There's no way for that not to be true, because our senses gather information everywhere from the physical environment that surrounds us.

**5. Less is more.** You may well be in a position to fill up space with lighting, staging, shows, entertainment, branding and iconography. But think back to the very basics that tell your story. People like space, so make sure you draw the line between inspiring them and confusing them.

Concentrate on the story and the message, and don't muddy the waters with too many visual elements and too confusing an environment.

**7. Be focused.** Sometimes it's not best to get opinions too early in the creative process. What is in your mind may not translate too well until it is fully formed and brought to life. Equally, you'll have a strong view on what the end result will be so try to stay the course.

Many organizations do not know how to respond to creative people in their midst and those who are used to the corporate straight jacket may be wary of creativity and emotions. Yet, transformational experiences have to include both of these.

**8. Remember the people are the experience.** The whole point of the experience is that it is an experience. The most important element is the people that come and how they interact together. Give them talking points, make them happy with food and beverages, give them comfort in furniture, but also give them space to have their own experience. People like to find their own way, the experience creator's job is to guide them.

Very important advice. The experience and the transformation occurs within the individual. They must have the time and space to respond to the information, stimulation and environment. For organizations that are used to contriving and controlling the experience customers have, this is a total departure from that approach. Yet, it's the wave of the future. Think Airbnb and the experiences that are being provided along with the accommodations that allow discovery, serendipity and individual involvement. There's no turning back.

### **Tying the Experience to the Customer Buying Journey**

When customers begin searching for a leisure experience, the first thing they do is search for "what they want to do." They use this activity as their primary experience driver. To suit that search pattern, conscious experience design should begin with the experience driver and proceed to surround this driver with the other components that complement the main activity. If the experience driver activity is part of a larger leisure experience, use accommodations that complement the theme, restaurants that have either great local food, or food related to the trip theme. Add in other attractions and activities that are related to the experience driver and other components until the entire experience has been designed.

Clearly define the components of each experience, so that potential customers can easily grasp the activities they will be involved in and how the components of the experience all fit together. Wrap the entire experience in a “story of the journey” illustrating how the experience unfolds in real time. Delivering information that enables customers to organize their time in advance will go a long way to promoting participating in an experience at an unfamiliar place.

Before finalizing each experience, communicate it to potential customers ASAP to get feedback about what they believe they will like about the experiences and what they do not find appealing. Use the new experiences as a springboard to get potential customers involved in a dialogue surrounding the new experiences. As we learned earlier, research is clear that the ability to anticipate an experience adds to the happiness with the experience, so the sooner conversations begin with customers to get them into a dialogue about the actual experiences they can have, the sooner some level of relationship and trust will develop, and the sooner the customer will consider participating.

The Canadian Tourism Commission, which has taken the lead on experiential package design, believes that developing experiential packages begins with asking different questions than have been asked in traditional product development situations. These questions will apply to many other product development situations as well:

- What makes our region special and unique (e.g. people, places, stories, traditions, activities)?
- What memories do we want customers to leave with?
- What segments of customers are aligned with what we have to offer?
- Who do we need to collaborate with to craft a relevant, engaging customer experience?
- Which experiential components already exist, or could be developed, to form the foundation of a package or elements of a package?
- How can the experience be personalized?
- What unique, authentic and local treasures can be celebrated, showcased or engaged in?

If the experience being planned is also part of a larger experience, it is important to consider where customers will have been before this portion of their experience and where will they be going from here. To make the experience more effective, it

will be important to understand what part of the whole story the experience is working to tell, will have been told at other locations in the total experience, what will be told at this particular experience, and what will be told at other locations later on the itinerary, so that the experience at each location builds on the one before and doesn't duplicate others.

When beginning to put the actual experience, it is important to time the experience in small increments. Start with 5 minute increments, then blend those short segments into 10 or 20 minute increments. If the experience is a full day program, segment it first into half hour portions, later blending the 30 minute segments into half day long programs. Think through the transitions, and how customers will meet and connect. Break down each experiential component into small, simple pieces to ensure that every detail is thought through. If food is involved, consider and incorporate the prep time that will be involved. Think about "positive cues" that reinforce the experience once it is underway.

When selecting the partners and suppliers who are required to deliver the full experience, align them with the experience and with local availability. Consider weather, safety, have backup plan and what things, if any, customers need to be advised about in advance. Determine how any customer limitations will be handled and how they will be communicated in marketing materials.

The most important thing that can be done, since this is an experience customers will be paying for, is to pay attention to details! When a premium price is charged, even the smallest details must be taken care of. The importance of this can't be overstated in planning, delivery, and follow-up.

The next most important thing is to select the people that customers will come into contact with, the staff they will interact with. These people play an even more important role than brand ambassadors in experiential marketing experiences. They can make or break an experience. Educate everyone involved in the entire experience about customer expectations, the nature of the experience and what is being created, seek their input and when possible. At Disney the "cast" or the staff rehearses their roles over and over until they grasped the conversation, actions and perspectives of the experience and their interaction with customers. Test-run the entire experience with staff, as well as selected customers who are "friends of the house," and let them offer feedback before it is offered to the public.

If the experience is surrounded by other elements in the area surrounding it, employ a mystery shopper to go through each experience entirely, take the tours, eat in the restaurants, drive the distances between the stops, and stay in the hotels and utilize the feedback appropriately to make modifications. When setting the price to be charged for the experience, remember that the experience offered is unique and can't replicated elsewhere. Add a premium for that factor. People will pay for value they cannot get from any other organization.

When customers arrive, move immediately to make them comfortable, engage their minds and make their actual experience as effortless as possible. Make saying yes and doing easy, and they will come. Make it great and transformational, and they will come back. Better yet, they will go home and tell all their friends about the great memories they made. That's marketing that is priceless, you can't pay for that.