

# Rural Research Report



Winter 2010  
Volume 21, Issue 2

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Published by the Illinois  
Institute for Rural Affairs

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## Innovative Ways to Market Your Community

The need to attract new businesses and residents to small rural communities is well-understood, but many other pressing tasks, emergencies, and requests seem to take higher priority for community leaders. Although marketing is an essential long-range strategy for helping a community to be viable and grow, many small communities lack the expertise and resources to mount a successful marketing approach. This report presents several basic implementation strategies and brief examples of communities that have succeeded in attracting new businesses by using a marketing approach.

With the proliferation and popularity of Internet-based marketing technology, community leaders are very tempted to create websites and/or social media vehicles before employing solid, inclusive planning for the selection of the appropriate marketing strategy. Selecting marketing and promotional techniques can be likened to moving through an abundant food buffet—the choices are endless, so the participant tends to take a little of everything and not really engage deeply in anything.

In creating a marketing plan, community leaders first need to identify what makes their area unique or what will attract visitors, new residents, or businesses. One frame of reference through which to view this process involves tourism and examining how even overnight visitors might play a role. If visitors have a great experience in a destination, when they return to their home communities the message about their experience that is communicated to friends, family, and business contacts may persuade others to also visit. This is an example of *buzz marketing* or *word-of-mouth marketing*. Buzz marketing is often overlooked as a strategy to be pursued with a defined plan of action. Word-of-mouth marketing succeeds because (1) it is believable, (2) it is self-reinforcing, and (3) it is self-spreading (Li and Bernoff 2008).

The foundation or essence of today's popular social media involves people talking or "buzzing" about something they have experienced such as a destination. A great visitor experience does not just happen overnight, however. Instead, it involves careful planning, identifying the brand of the community, and businesses partnering with local organizations as well as working with regional and state groups. This creation of buzz marketing can be cost-effective compared to other promotional choices available today. However, using tourism as an example, it is important to narrow down which of the tourism segments best apply to your community. One of the segments that is gaining in popularity is agriculture tourism or agri-tourism, which is discussed later in this report.

### Marketing Niches and the Marketing Plan

The place to begin is to create or update a community marketing plan. The components or questions to be asked in designing this plan include the following:

- What are the strengths of our community?
- What are we lacking in order for our community to grow?

- What are the external impactors on the essence of our community?
- What do our citizens value about our community?

Just as important as the identification of strengths is the identification of weaknesses. For example, are there places to stay, eat, and be entertained? How attractive is the environment? How welcoming are the residents?

An effective means to compile the answers to these questions is to use a resident participation process. Community input gatherings are popular with many communities. An important factor in the success of these gatherings is the use of an outside, skilled, and impartial facilitator. The initial meeting should be publicized widely through local media, with participation by local organizations encouraged. A recommended method is to divide the larger group into smaller groups to brainstorm the answers to questions provided.

Another successful approach is to survey residents and businesses in advance, compile the answers, and then have small groups prioritize and filter the results. It is important to keep the sessions positive and minimize complaint sessions. A good example of gathering the input of the community is the Wisconsin Dells, an explanation of which is found later in this report.

### **Community Strengths**

In using the tourism framework for assessment, the discussion can be directed in two ways:

1. What do potential visitors need and want for a memorable experience?
2. What unique themes, history, location, geography, or other features will attract visitors?

In terms of what potential visitors need, there are the basic components of a tourist package: overnight accommodations, eating, shopping, signage, access, events, cultural attractions, and other items along these lines. Participants in the small groups can compare the basic components to what actually exists in a community.

For the second question, participants are examining what unique features of their community would interest visitors. Examples could be scenic byways, parks, trails, attractions, events, or cultural features. Participants should examine the obvious and not so obvious themes of their community. Themes may be part of the community's heritage, such as

German or Scandinavian culture, or the early roots of business such as the production of a certain product:

Washington County, Iowa, knew that they had a strong agriculture tourism component to their area. They had also started a barn quilt program. In order to maximize their potential success, the Washington County Chamber of Commerce, Barn Quilts of Washington County and several other organizations convened a two-day assessment of their current tourism products. They engaged an out of the area facilitator. The first day was spent touring agritourism attractions and businesses. The second day was a meeting of interested individual residents as well as groups representing businesses and organizations for the purpose of inventorying all current and potential agritourism sites. The group also developed strategies and action steps within a development and marketing plan. One of the strategies that emerged was to utilize the fact that the county seat, Washington, was located in the center of the relatively square shaped county. Four itineraries were planned that looped out from the center. By brainstorming the unique characteristics of each quadrant of the county (coinciding with the four loops), a long term plan was created for developing visitor friendly routes. To date, three of the loops have been created, with new barn quilt sites on each one. This development, coupled with enhanced marketing, has resulted in increased visitor traffic to Washington County. (Barn Quilts of Washington County, Iowa 2010)

### **Essence or Spirit of a Community**

As the theme of a community is explored and examined, the spirit of a community becomes part of the discussion. Oftentimes, this is the slogan placed on a sign at the city boundaries, welcoming visitors to the "Friendliest Town in USA." Isn't that what every town wants to be? Would you rather be the "Unfriendliness Town in USA?" Slogans can be descriptive, but they do need to differentiate a community from the competition. A community slogan should be positive, but it should also make the reader want to find out more about the destination. Mackinaw City, Michigan's slogan is "Living History, Making History." "Tomorrow's City, Today" is the theme for Lakewood, California. Natchez, Mississippi's slogan, "Timeless Beauty . . . Ageless Fun" makes the reader want to discover the evidence behind this claim.

## The Importance of Customer or Visitor Service

In building a community essence or spirit that supports buzz marketing, the effort needs to be felt by the visitor, not just read in promotional literature. Visitors should come away from their encounter with a community saying to themselves how friendly the community was, not having read it on the sign as they leave. Communities realize the need for a superlative customer service program. In order to really leave a lasting impression on a visitor, the whole community must embrace a superior customer service focus.

### Creating a Customer Service Focus

So, how does a community become customer focused? Civic, business, and organization leaders and citizen groups in a community all must decide that the visitors and customers must be number one. There are many steps to developing a superior customer service program, but attitude must be the main consideration. A destination with a community-wide effort in place to make every visitor and customer feel like they are the most important person will create positive word-of-mouth marketing and build a groundswell of positive messages to people and businesses that are looking for a new place with which to interact or locate.

Communities can organize workshops or seminars to (1) teach exemplary customer service practices and

(2) ensure that everyone is consistent in the type and level of customer service delivered. These workshops could be organized to include business owners, managers, and community leaders in the first sessions.

In designing the agenda for these workshops, the following issues could be discussed:

- Building a detailed base of knowledge of the customer, product, and marketing environment
- How to create a relationship with your customer or visitor
- Putting yourself in the customers' shoes
- Being genuine and practicing excellent listening skills
- How to provide the unexpected
- Understanding and creating the total experience

A second series of workshops can then be conducted for front-line workers in businesses and service-related organizations. Counter workers at places such as convenience stores, video stores, gift shops, and libraries are especially crucial to train because they often are the first contact with visitors as they ask for information about the community and/or recommendations for services.

## Balancing Needs and Scarce Resources

The marketing plan may be useful for focusing attention on enhancements that might make a given community a desirable location to visit. Ideally, community leaders can find or build these additional enhancements. However, since all communities face limited resources, a prioritization process is needed to select projects that create the maximum return on investment, and not necessarily what might be politically most advantageous.

Another factor to consider is what feature(s) of the community may offer greater return by simply expanding upon existing success. Virtually every community has strong assets and processes that are working. Finding and expanding these strategies or programs can sometimes yield quicker results than launching into an entirely new program which can be designed and/or implemented later. The Wisconsin Dells is a good example of a place that has expanded on existing success:

Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin, has created a very successful brand as the: "Waterpark Capital of the World."

Through a community assessment process, they determined that sports tournaments and events were also growing in popularity in the town. Several businesses had added non-professional sports facilities and were attracting very profitable events. Chula Vista Resort added a 90,000 square foot dome that can hold a full-size football field or 10 basketball courts. Chula Vista has hosted 900 collegiate fencers as well as a three-day collegiate women's volleyball tournament. At a long range planning session five years ago, community leaders determined that additional facilities would exponentially grow the capacity of the community to host other events. Steps were taken to encourage building of additional facilities. A complete inventory of all possible sports venues including bowling alleys and public fields was compiled. The result has been that the community has the capability to attract a wide variety of sports events and competitions. The Wisconsin Dells Visitor and Convention Bureau has expanded their marketing efforts to attract these tournaments. Youth baseball,

softball, soccer, and hockey tournaments as well as skating competitions have all found a friendly, accommodating and understanding home in the Wisconsin Dells. The successful growth of sports events has also benefitted the surrounding communities of Reedsburg, Baraboo and Prairie du Sac by utilizing their sports facilities, hotels and restaurants. An example of the

economic impact is the Ultimate Tournaments, based in Woodridge, Illinois. Their recently completed events in the Wisconsin Dells used 1,200 room-nights in area hotels. Organizers have planned events for the following winter that will bring in 350 teams from 15 states and Canada. (Adams 2009)

## Agri-Tourism: Another Market Niche

As noted earlier, many rural communities or regions are building upon the tourism sector of agriculture tourism or agri-tourism. By building an agri-tourism destination, communities can generate the marketing buzz that attracts people to the area, first as visitors, and then, hopefully, to relocate.

What is agri-tourism? There are many definitions and descriptions, but the following is one of the most complete:

The act of visiting a working farm or an agricultural, horticultural, or agri-business operation for the purpose of enjoyment, education or active involvement in the activities of the farm or operation. Agri-tourism also provides alternative revenue streams to farming operations as well as economic impact to communities through tourism. (Agriculture Tourism Partners of Illinois 2010)

An excellent source to explore the different types of agri-tourism businesses is the Agriculture Tourism Partners of Illinois (ATPI) website: [www.agfun.com](http://www.agfun.com). This association was organized to promote and grow agri-tourism in Illinois. Several other states also have similar agri-tourism associations, including Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. In other cases, such as Indiana and Kansas, the state bureaus of either agriculture or tourism or a state university provide the support for an organized promotion and growth of agri-tourism. Websites for these other states are provided in the “Resources” section of this document.

There are many benefits to an organized effort to build and support an agri-tourism destination, not the least of which is the additional economic impact of visitors to a community. Visitors, especially overnight visitors, spend money

at the agri-tourism attractions, businesses, and events, plus they purchase other services at shops, stores, and restaurants.

Two additional benefits to a thriving agri-tourism destination relate to the type of customer attracted. The first customer segment is the family market. These people want to come out from cities and suburbs to encounter a genuine, wholesome, learning experience. Agri-tourism, when implemented to the fullest, provides an educational, aesthetical, entertaining, and escaping experience. By attracting these people and providing an outstanding experience, a community or region promotes the word-of-mouth marketing that the visitors take back to their families, friends, neighbors, and other groups.

A second market segment that agri-tourism can enhance for a community is the trend of baby boomers looking for a place to conduct small, agriculture-related businesses. These businesses could involve the growing of products sold directly to consumers, such as vegetables, or they could involve customized and specialized products such as rocking horses or decorative products. A community must carefully determine if this market is feasible in their area because of land availability and/or zoning laws. A community can sometimes design measures that encourage the growth of these small, specialized businesses. In any case, the communities can play a strong role in helping these entrepreneurs market their products. Marketing several businesses together can contribute to the attraction of a destination. By using the community assessment procedures outlined earlier in this document to build or enhance an agri-tourism destination, a community can also design other creative marketing methods such as events, festivals, themes, or branding.

## The Event as a Marketing Tool

A carefully designed event, festival, or regularly held gathering can be utilized to promote the growth of a community, especially around the basis of agri-tourism. Some communities have created annual group tours to promote not only the stops along the itinerary, but also the quality of life in the area. Efforts should be made to promote the benefits of living and working in the community to the visitors on a tour:

In the communities of Wisconsin Rapids and Stevens Point, Wisconsin the convention & visitor bureaus felt that they had unique agri-tourism related businesses to design a three day motorcoach tour. The Spud, Berry, Dairy Tour was created to promote the business of growing and processing cranberries, potatoes as well as the unique features of the progressive dairy farms in their area. A three-day tour was planned to occur during the height of the harvest time, which is the fall season. A complete package was constructed including meals, guides, hotel rooms and motorcoach transportation during the tour. Participants were required to provide their own means to travel to the area. The tour itinerary is also available for tour companies by

appointment. A successful tour was conducted the first year with over 40 participants. By attracting participants from all over the Midwest U.S., these communities promoted the quality of life and business opportunities for their area. The region added value by attracting the participation of Max Armstrong, one of the hosts of *This Week in AgriBusiness* and a camera crew. *This Week* is shown on the RFD-TV network around the country and Canada reaching thousands of viewers. Plans are to continue to promote the tour and hopefully expand the number of participants. (*This Week in AgriBusiness* 2010)

The rise in popularity of farmers' markets throughout Illinois, is a result of the expanding fresh food production market segment. Visitors to these markets also experience other features of the communities. To fully realize the benefits of these markets, it is important to keep the products provided locally grown in order to meet the genuine product expectations of consumers. By adding educational components to these markets, visitors are provided with additional value that will create a positive, lasting experience.

## Social Media

The recent rise in the popularity and use of the multifaceted social media takes the concept of buzz marketing to a whole new level of complexity and management. The entry into the realm of social media is relatively easy at first by simply utilizing Facebook, Twitter, or a blog. To realize the best return on an investment (as well as what the real investment cost will be), a community is best served by understanding the dynamics of social media. This can entail the enlisting of an experienced social media expert. One excellent source to better understand these phenomena is the 2008 book *Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies* by Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff. The authors have labeled the enhancement of buzz marketing by social media as *groundswell*:

A social trend in which people use technologies to get the things they need from each other, rather than from traditional institutions like corporations.

One of these needs could be where people want to live, work, or start a business.

The authors claim that the following three principles should guide the consideration of how to best utilize social media: (1) focus on relationships, not technologies; (2) start small/start with learning, especially from the groundswell; and (3) prepare to let go of control.

## Summary

The successful marketing of communities and regions can be accomplished using traditional methods, or communities can look for creative means to set them apart from competitors. These creative means do not always have to

include expensive investments. The important first step is to create or update a marketing plan, including community assessment of the current and desired situation.

Buzz or word-of-mouth marketing can be a very successful outcome of this assessment as well as an overall guiding principle to use while selecting and enlisting strategies of action. By attracting new visitors to an area and providing them with an exceptional experience, the positive image is then spread by the visitors to hopefully result in new residents and businesses to that area.

Strategies to consider can include (1) seeking community-wide superlative customer service through education and training, (2) considering the creation of an agri-tourism

destination, (3) evaluating the essence or spirit of the community as exemplified in the town logo or slogan, and (4) deciding what is needed to provide a complete customer experience whether it be through services or facilities.

Partnering with other area communities and regions is also crucial to creating a value-added, complete destination that will not only attract new visitors, but will also bring them and their families, friends, and neighbors back again and again—hopefully, to become a part of the community.

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- This Week In AgriBusiness* [Television show]. 2010. Retrieved January 21, 2010, from [www.agbizweek.com](http://www.agbizweek.com).

## Resources

- Ament Associates Inc.: [www.amentassociates.com](http://www.amentassociates.com)
- Arkansas Agritourism Association: [www.naturallyarkansas.org](http://www.naturallyarkansas.org)
- Central Wisconsin Tourism Association: [www.centralwisconsin.org](http://www.centralwisconsin.org)
- Kansas Department of Commerce: [www.kansasagritourism.org](http://www.kansasagritourism.org)
- Michigan Farm Market & Agritourism Association: [www.mi-fmat.org](http://www.mi-fmat.org)
- Oklahoma Agritourism Association: [www.oklahomaagritourism.com](http://www.oklahomaagritourism.com)
- Pennsylvania Farm Vacation Association: [www.pafarmstay.com](http://www.pafarmstay.com)
- Wisconsin Agriculture Tourism Association: [www.visitdairyland.com](http://www.visitdairyland.com)
- Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin Convention & Visitors Bureau: [www.wisdells.com](http://www.wisdells.com)
- Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin Convention & Visitors Bureau: [www.visitrapids.com](http://www.visitrapids.com)
- Word of Mouth Marketing Association: [www.womma.org](http://www.womma.org)

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