



Attracting Small Groups Through Adapting Your Offer

Industry Topic Specialist

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Specialist Highlights

Stayed true to their core mission while innovating to grow their 2021 business and welcome guests back together safely, comfortably with new, permanent experiences. The following were core to their decision-making and development.

Building Trust through:

- Smaller audiences/pods
- Outdoor venues to increase the sense of safety
- Shorter concerts and no intermission to decrease opportunity for cluster gatherings
- Separate entrances for new venues to separate traffic flows
- Proactive communication showing new venues and seating, traffic flows prior to ticket purchase

Keeping Fresh by:

- Reconfiguring the barn to provide a new perspective for past guests
- Building new outdoor venues to stage new experiences for groups of 25, 50 and 100
- A more intimate experience.

Becoming More Viable by:

- Engaging artists for multiple experiences on a single day
- Increasing their COVID-19 capacity and scale it up or down.
- Shifting from free to paid online experiences.

Discussion Ideas & Tips

COVID-19 restrictions have forced businesses that attract large crowds to reframe their visitor experiences and/or business model to adapt.

“Nature and music have always been integral to Westben and the pandemic has offered us the chance to take this to the next level – both digitally and on site/in person.”

Donna Bennett

This summary highlights the discussion and ideas generated by 18 Ontario-based tourism operators/professionals regarding how to adapt their tourism offers to attract small groups.

Tactical Practical Take Aways

- Create experiences that are shorter and can be offered more frequently in order to recoup revenues that would have come from larger groups.
- Offer the same experience, multiple times a day, to get the most from the initial set-up time and cost.
- Reframe existing experiences to appeal to new audiences. A day experience offered at night will likely to attract a new audience, an outdoor leisure experience may also be suitable for small corporate meetings.
- Create a series of interconnected experiences to build repeat business. This could be by offering levels of experiences, or by offering the experience at different times of the year.
- Consider segmenting large groups into smaller ones based on themes that reflect their interests. This could be different music genres as Westben is doing, or themes relating to the history of the area, food, etc.
- Provide low risk booking and cancellation policies to provide comfort for travellers to encourage advance bookings.
- Assess your set up for opportunities to structure spaces in new ways that support hosting small group gatherings, e.g. the placement of chairs
- Partner with local operators. Not only will this strengthen your offer, it supports others in your community, strengthening the overall destination. Furthermore, partners may bring complementary skills to the table and oftentimes will bring a new audience.

New Ideas shared at the most recent session

- A benefit of COVID-19 has been that businesses are taking time to retrench and review their business model and processes and are identifying elements that can be eliminated as well as ideas that can be brought forward.

- Investing in outdoor infrastructure, such as fire pits, has been a popular strategy to extend the season by increasing guest comfort in the outdoors. Where such investments were not feasible, operators designed outdoor experiences with indoor, warm-up breaks allowing guests to move inside for short periods of time.
- Review experiences that have been developed for children to determine if they can be adapted for an adult audience.
- People are increasingly travelling to pursue their passions/favourite activities (e.g. paddling, SUP, cycling). Tapping into these passions/activities can be a way to cultivate new markets for small group/bubble tours.
- Food has become an increasingly important part of the visitor experience and is not always something an operator is able to provide. In such instances local culinary partners were identified as possible solutions.
- Some businesses have found increased benefits from small groups. It's enabled a more intimate and engaging experience that can be sold at a higher price and is something they plan to continue offering post-pandemic.
- COVID has created a lot of stress – some operators are finding that a focus on providing experiences that are in nature, and easy to do, provides opportunities to for guests de-stress and provides new revenue streams for the business.
- Layering digital and live experiences at different price points can be a way to leverage content and address different customer segments. Setting some experiences up as “pay what you can”, recognizes that some people have been hit financially by COVID.
- Identifying under-used assets and offering them for use/rent to others who take over the space and bring in their own groups. Furnace Falls Farm is doing this with Frontenac Arch Biosphere and their Farm and Forest program.
- Working with your regional and provincial tourism marketing organizations is helpful at this time as they are able to get messages out to a larger audience to supplement marketing via the local DMOs that tend to have a hyper local focus.

Additional Ideas shared in previous sessions

- Collaboration to create a variety of experiences in a community was discussed as an effective strategy to attract visitors, giving them more things to do for the time they invest travelling to the destination.
- Offering and moving experiences outdoors, where people currently feel safest, is proving to be effective in attracting visitors. Ideas generated that apply to small groups and yet could scale up as restrictions lift included:
 - Small group, self-guided or app-based outdoor experiences’.
 - Geo-caching – physical or virtual can be a great way to help visitors engage with and learn about an area.
 - Mystery tours and scavenger hunts are effective at getting people to move around and engaging with local businesses/the area.
- Some retailers and galleries are finding a higher proportion of visitors are simply looking around, treating the business as a tourist attraction, with no intention to purchase anything. Layering visitor opportunities at a variety of price points from a basic ‘entry fee’ for those who just want to enjoy a property, browse and relax, to offer mid and higher-priced activities and engaging experiences, is a strategy that can diversify revenue opportunities for visitors who have varying abilities/willingness to pay.
- Transformational Nature Connection is offering experiences to small groups, or ‘pods’ which allows them to personalize elements and delve more deeply into the specific desires of each group to deliver a more nuanced experience to meet the group’s needs.
- Globus Theatre Opened 7,000 square feet of space using Plexiglas screens developed by Ontario Staging which allowed them to offer musical performances and provided a non-distracting safety barrier for the audience and performers.
- Elmhirst’s Resort introduced hybrid meetings where small groups of 10-15 people meet in person and others are brought in via zoom for specific parts of the meeting.

- Westben is suggesting concertgoers bring their own seating for outdoor concerts. This addresses people’s preference to use their own things and reduces the costs to the business (buying outdoor chairs and ongoing/between performance cleaning).
- Look at your community and surroundings with a fresh perspective in order to identify new venues to run existing or new experiences. Westben is doing this with their new, curated nature walk and musical performance on the riverbed at the Mary West Nature Conservancy.
- Review your experience and create an Experience Map that illustrates the customer journey, highlighting the new changes and guest requirements required due to the pandemic. Identify the points throughout the journey where it makes sense to build trust with the customer and the best way to do this.
- Collaborate with others in your community to create a stronger draw as Fenlon Falls did when the local stores worked together to present a two-day “Shop with your Bubble” event. Customers made reservations to shop and socialize with each other at participating retailers. The event was so successful it continued for a month and may be brought back.

Additional Helpful Links

Articles regarding the importance of trust in these times:

- Deloitte: [Maintaining Customer Loyalty and Trust During Uncertainty](#)
- Harvard Business Review: [Ensure That Your Customer Relationships Outlast Coronavirus](#)
- Ontario funding program for outdoor infrastructure: [TIA Ontario funding grants](#)

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