



Listen to Learn
An Important Part of Every Project

NTC was involved in a project in California which required that we conduct what they termed a “listen to learn” effort. The results were very helpful and we now incorporate the approach in every project we are involved in. We discovered that through the process, we learned about both the barriers that respondents believed hampered additional tourism development, as well as the solutions they had considered, but not implemented for one reason or another.

The following is a description of the Listen to Learn process and results used in a project in Idaho. Listen to Learn Interviews were completed within a community outreach with individuals from different sectors of the visitor facing economy and municipal officials.

Interviewees

A series of 30 open ended interviews conducted with (1) guides/outfitters, (2) retail, (3) dining, (4) accommodations, (5) attractions, (6) public lands officials and (7) municipal officials, generated very cogent information related to increasing visitors to the area. The interviewer had researched the location prior to the call and used that information to open the conversation. Interviewees were informed of the effort to increase visitors to the region to increase the economic development through visitor spending from overnight visitors who dine, shop and otherwise spend in the area, with multiple night trips being the most lucrative. Throughout the interviews, interviewees pointed out situations, restrictions, rules and so on, that were barriers to increased visitors or increased offerings and some offered solutions to these situations. All in all, the interviews generated very important and helpful information that when implemented will greatly increase the ability to attract and serve additional visitors in the region.

Responses from Visitor Facing Locations

The owners of the visitor facing locations that participated in interviews expressed an appreciation that “something was being done” to increase visitors to the area and responded very positively to efforts to increase tourism in the area. Many came forward with concepts and ideas to expand visitor offerings, create new programs and expand promotion that they had considered but not implemented. One of the major expressed opportunities was the desire for new winter activities such as cross country skiing and snowmobiling that should be developed. All were very aware there was no online presence for the area.

Expressed Opportunities

The interviews pointed out that there are more outfitters and guides who serve or are willing to serve visitors who are staying in the Lost River Valley, than initially anticipated. There are opportunities to expand visitor offerings to several niche markets such as mountain climbers, RV travelers, rodeo aficionados, and scenic byway travelers can be attracted with specific marketing and messages aimed at these visitors. Plus it was apparent from the calls that communications with and between the owners of various visitor facing locations will begin to strengthen the visitor serving community to result in collective concepts and programs that incorporate more than one.

Expressed Barriers

Signage

Making potential visitors aware of what is available when they are traveling through the area is the first point from which to increase visitors to Mackay and Arco. It became apparent in the interviews that signage pointing travelers to attractions and visitor service locations are a problem throughout the region. Some

signage was placed at the wrong locations, some needed are non existent and most do not support visitors discovering locations and attractions in the region.

Public Land Restrictions/Idaho Fish and Game Restrictions

Several outfitters indicated that permitting, licensing and other processes that enable them to serve visitors in the region are already severely restricting their ability to carry out their existing offerings, much less programs to serve additional visitors. Apparently, the lack of hunting tags for outfitters, access to forest trails that is limited by the number of days available, the licensing of guides and outfitters are the most restrictive in the country, and other issues will impact the ability to attract more visitors who would choose to use a guide service or outfitter for hunting, fishing, trail riding and other natural area based activities, rather than participating on their own. Apparently in Challis one can purchase a tag over the counter, while in Mackay tags are given out by Idaho Fish and Game in a draw. It was expressed that 8 rifle elk tags had been cut back to 5, and hunts severely controlled since the 1970s, with another constraint being that all forest use days have to be used before requesting more, impacting the ability to plan for additional business. Hunters who recognize the scarcity of licenses call from California to have then pre-printed locally to make sure they are available. These situations will be particularly important to resolve because additional visitors to the area, likely unfamiliar with the terrain, fishing and so on, will choose to use a guide.

Dark Sky Reserve

Mackay sits right at the edge of the Central Idaho Dark Sky Reserve and is certainly in a position to be added to the reserve area. Yet even if it is not, the Gold Level experience has the ability to attract a significant visitor pool.

Winter Activity Restrictions

There is great potential for incorporation of cross country skiing and snowmobiling into a program of winter activities in the area. However, even though the Bureau of Land Management indicated there were no restrictions on the use of trails on their lands, there is currently no trail groomer to keep the trails on these lands in shape for skiers and snow machines.

Lack of Website Presence and Printed Materials

Virtually all interviewees, no matter what their job, were aware there was no cohesive digital presence for the Lost River Valley and believed that one was imperative to serve as a visitor destination. Identifying the resources and visitor services in Mackay, Arco and surrounds required a protracted search of more than 10 websites, some accurate, most not, to compile a list of the visitor facing resources, assets, and services. If we were not able to immediately what was discovered was accurate or valid, there is no way for potential visitors to do so. So currently, any visitors who do discover the communities are discouraged by not knowing if what they find is credible.

Lack of Opening Hours/Access

It is likely that increased visitors can be expected to be in the area any of seven nights a week. Currently, the museum is only open for limited hours on Friday, no restaurants are open Sunday and Monday nights, and other locations have opening hours Monday-Friday, even though nearly 60% of all leisure trips are either over a weekend or a long weekend.

Lack of Accommodations Capacity

Ultimately, the limited number of accommodations is going to catch up with increasing visitors and will serve to constrain further development. Already, during special events, local accommodations are filled with event producers and other technical and management personnel, leaving very few rooms to serve visitors. Less than 25% of the visitors who visit Craters of the Moon actually stay in Mackay or Arco.

Local Attitudes

It was expressed that a certain number of residents in the area appear to believe that additional visitors are a detriment to their lifestyle and that their livelihood is threatened by visitors. Others expressed that Mackay appears to be becoming a bedroom community for retirees who move to the region for low costs and lack of commotion. Others in the area have looked negatively at the success of Discover Wood River Valley and would prefer not to have that success repeated in the Lost River Valley.

Promoting Federal Lands

There are US Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management locations across the country that have been featured in brochures, on websites and other promotional materials. These actions in other areas have created a much higher level of awareness than afforded to attractions in the Lost River Valley and in comparison resources on public lands elsewhere, the resources in the area are not receiving the same level of attention as resources in other locations in Idaho and across the nation.

What Does All This Mean?

Key Finding 1

Now that perceived barriers to expanding tourism are known, they can be addressed one by one to seek solutions.

Key Finding 2

Additional cooperation will be required between visitor service locations to rectify situations such as no restaurants being open on Sunday and Monday evenings.

Key Finding 3

The limited level of available accommodations is ultimately going to become a barrier to any significant expansion in the visitor population.

Key Finding 4

Local attitudes toward visitors and people from outside the local area will likely continue to have an impact on increasing visitors. All though interview respondents did say things are changing, there are still prevailing attitudes in some sectors of the community that increased visitors are not a good thing.

Key Finding 5

Stronger partnerships with Federal land management organizations will be required to maximize visitor experiences on these lands, to ensure the availability of the visitors activities as well as consistent attention and promotion.

Key Finding 6

Signage directing travelers to attractions in the area is a problem throughout the region.

Key Finding 7

Attraction partners will need to be educated about today's visitors in order to plan and deliver their offerings appropriately. Individual traveling parties have very different needs than group travelers and these will need to be addressed to attract the most lucrative visitor markets to the area.