

## 2.2. Highlight the most charming and desirable elements of each community in visitor information

This Strategic Action strengthens Montana's tourism marketing efforts, and builds respect for the tourism industry in Montana.

### Recommended Tactics

#### **MTOT, Regions**

- » Ensure that visitor information prominently highlights the most charming and desirable amenities identified in each town.
- » Incorporate any content generated through MTOT-led events such as the community tourism workshops held throughout the state (*"Coming Together to Expand Montana's Tourism Story"*).
- » Work closely with the Montana Main Street program to leverage and coordinate efforts.

#### **CVBs, Communities, Tribes**

- » Identify the most charming and vibrant assets and amenities of the town from the visitor's perspective – things that a visitor might mention in a postcard or post on an online community or review site.
- » Incorporate any content generated through MTOT-led events such as the community tourism workshops held throughout the state (*"Coming Together to Expand Montana's Tourism Story"*).
- » Present the most charming aspects of the town experientially, so that visitors can imagine experiencing and enjoying them.
- » Connect with the potential visitor by telling the unique "story" of the town – drawing on local history, characters, the arts, annual events, etc. Project (i) authenticity, (ii) uniqueness, and (iii) a sense of "relaxing hospitality" and "comfort" for visitors.
- » Use ratings and review sites and other electronic word-of-mouth (e.g., TripAdvisor, online community discussions) to help identify the best amenities and link to reviews to strengthen credibility and reduce risk for the visitor.
- » Include the arts and culture such as performing arts, art galleries and markets, art walks and other cultural activities.
- » Periodically re-evaluate the choice of charming and desirable elements, including consulting online travel review sites for fresh perspective.
- » Make the local community aware of the visitor information and the way it presents the community, to help build and broaden local pride.

### Indicators of Success

- » Visitor information presents each town in a way that immediately highlights the best elements from the visitors' perspective. The charm and personality of each town and the most desirable amenities and services for travelers are all easy for visitors to discover.

- » Each town's story and information regarding local events help build a personal connection with potential visitors and meets a growing desire for authenticity.
- » The presentation of each town provides an appealing sense of the experience a visitor will have rather than a list of place names.
- » The visitor can perceive the richness and variety of experiences to be found in the community.
- » Visitors are confident that amenities are available and appealing, and therefore do not perceive Montana to be a "risky" destination. Visitors may be drawn to plan longer trips to include more towns in their multi-destination itineraries or to extend their itinerary beyond the current common travel corridors.
- » Montana's Brand promise of charming towns is more credible, and the state delivers on the promise.

### Background & Rationale

Research shows the importance of reducing the perceived "riskiness" of a destination by assuring travelers that the amenities, services, and comfort that they seek are available in Montana's small towns. While a list of hotels and restaurants can assure travelers that there will be a place to eat or sleep, it does not assure visitors of the "comfort" they desire. By highlighting the most "charming" amenities, visitor information can pull in visitors by (i) giving assurance of "comfort", (ii) helping establish a unique and appealing "sense of place", and (iii) helping the visitor build expectations of the *experience* that is offered in the town.

In many community sessions, particularly in less visited areas or areas where most travelers were just passing through, stakeholders expressed a desire to increase tourism marginally – a few more visitors stopping for lunch or a snack or to visit the local museum. Tourism today is highly *experiential*, and even the smallest of towns can offer the traveler a *memorable* short break. It may be a stop on the Montana Dinosaur Trail or stepping into the local soda fountain or diner for the *best* huckleberry milkshake yet (even better than the one they found yesterday). It could be stopping to watch glassblowers in Corvallis to break up the drive or looping along the "Bale Trail" to make getting there half the fun. It could be homemade soup for lunch at the corner cafe or dinner at one of Montana's fabulous restaurants hidden off the beaten track. By highlighting those things that can contribute something special to the visitor's larger vacation experience, these small towns can increase their tourism in an incremental but meaningful way.

The visitor experience can also benefit from the "little things" that offer comfort – welcoming coffee shops or cozy restaurants, nice places to take a stroll or a hike, lodging that makes you want to settle right in, quaint downtowns or interesting architecture. Their charm may derive from physical attributes or from experiential attributes.

Local events – such as farmers' markets, street music, arts festivals, and evening art walks – add charm and help the visitor feel a connection to the town. The arts offer an additional facet to the visitor experience offered by the community, adding richness and diversity.

The Montana Main Street Program, within the Montana Department of Commerce, is a valuable resource for communities seeking to leverage their efforts and coordinate with other small Montana towns. Using review sites and travel blogs to identify the most charming aspects of a town improves the chances

that the selection fits with the *visitors' perspective*. These websites have been shown to provide trusted word-of-mouth recommendations. Linking to such sites and reviews from official tourism information leverages that credibility and offers the visitor “objective” praise to back up the promises of an official tourism site. Many other resources exist to produce the “story” of a town. Tap the knowledge of local volunteers, civic leaders, or amateur historians who have worked to preserve the heritage of the community. Look to existing historical or cultural studies of the town completed by third parties. For example, the BLM’s commemoration of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1862 Homestead Act has produced stories and images related to a number of towns around the state. Yellowstone Public Radio has produced many narratives on local towns, characters, and history around the state. Many books have been published on the history of small Montana towns. Draw upon these sources and others for inspiration, link to existing materials, or use excerpts from published works (within the bounds of “fair use” guidelines).

Research has shown the power of telling the authentic story of a place. It is cultural differences that give most places their distinctiveness. Stories and anecdotes make a community more meaningful and attractive, helping visitors to form an emotional connection. They can be informative and inspirational.

MTOT’s 2010 study on the visitor’s travel planning process provides confirmation of the importance of conveying excitement rather than simply providing functional information. As one traveler explained, “what I like... [is] a little blurb about why I should go there or see that or what’s worth experiencing. There’s a depth, some perspective and it’s like finding little treasures, little gems.”

Telling the stories of Montana’s towns has the *collective* effect of giving nonresident visitors a richer sense of Montana’s culture and history and adds credibility to the Brand promise of charming small towns. In addition, telling the unique individual stories of each town allows communities to differentiate themselves *within* the Montana Brand. Because Montana’s nonresident visitors tend to take *multi-destination* trips, it is important to remember that this differentiation is not intended to lure visitors away from surrounding towns, but rather allows the visitor to plan a trip that includes stops in your town *and* other towns on their route. This will lead to a better distribution of tourism throughout the state, particularly if it induces travelers to stop along the way rather than traveling quickly and directly to their primary destination.

## Resources

“Geo-Travelers and Travel Planning” at <http://www.travelmontana.mt.gov/newsandupdates/mtotpublications2010.pdf>

The Montana Main Street Program at [www.mtmainstreet.mt.gov](http://www.mtmainstreet.mt.gov)

Travel blogs can help identify the best attributes of a town from a visitor’s perspective. Search for mention of your community at [www.blogsearch.google.com](http://www.blogsearch.google.com) using the search terms “travel blog” and the town name

Materials produced by the BLM to commemorate the Homestead Act, found at <http://homesteadingmontana.org/>

Narratives produced by Yellowstone Public Radio, found at [www.ypradio.org](http://www.ypradio.org).