4.3.   Stay current with social media tools for effective interaction and relationship building with visitors

This Strategic Action strengthens Montana's tourism marketing efforts.

Recommended Tactics

MTOT, Regions, CVBs

- » Ensure that social media tools are designed optimally for the evolving role they play in attracting and supporting visitors, as identified by research and analysis (see Strategic Action 4.1.).

- » Examine and monitor the audience reached by Montana through each of its social media outlets to tailor the message optimally for that market segment.

- » Incorporate additional social media outlets and relationship-building functions (e.g., deals and discounts, contests, or cross-selling), where supported by research and analysis and where feasible.

- » Integrate social media with the online and mobile presence.

- » Provide guidance for communities, tribes, businesses and organizations to help inform their decisions regarding a social media presence.

Communities, Tribes, Businesses & Organizations

- » Critically evaluate the value of a social media presence and the potential for useful interaction and relationship building with visitors. Include analytics, research and analysis in the evaluation (see Strategic Action 4.1).

- » Ensure that you have a high quality product or service before you enter the social media arena. Lay the groundwork for positive electronic word-of-mouth by being committed to customer satisfaction or avoid opening the door to negative electronic word-of-mouth.

- » Interact with visitors through existing outlets, for example:

    • monitor and respond to reviews (positive and negative) on ratings and review sites (e.g. TripAdvisor, Yelp);

    • embed widgets for ratings and review sites on your website to encourage reviews from customers;

    • embed widgets for social media outlets (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) on your website to encourage word-of-mouth about your product or service; or

    • submit content for consideration on the Facebook page and other social media channels managed by MTOT, Regions, and CVBs.

- » Participate in any online communities that are relevant to key niche markets for your product or service (see Strategic Action 5.6).

- » Draw upon MTOT, Regions, CVBs, and ITRR guidance to inform decisions regarding a social media presence.

Indicators of Success

» The characteristics and market segments of Montana's audience on each social media outlet are known.

» Each social media outlet has an appropriate and clearly delineated role to play in non-resident tourism promotion and marketing and is evaluated against these goals.

» Tools are made available to facilitate visitor sharing of their experience (e.g. travel blogs, photos).

» Relationship-building activities that are implemented produce identifiable promotional benefits.

» Businesses and organizations take a measured approach to using social media, supporting their customers with a sustainable level of effort.

» Montana tourism stakeholders value and actively use MTOT guidance.

Background & Rationale

Publicly available research on the use of social media (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) for tourism promotion is very limited, the marketing value of these tools for DMOs is as yet unclear, and industry best practices are just beginning to emerge.

The key activity for this strategy is critical evaluation of social media efforts to ensure that they contribute meaningfully to the marketing and promotional efforts of the Montana tourism industry. Critical analysis is needed in order to tailor content, combine social media with other sources of visitor information to form an effective system, and allocate resources optimally. MTOT, Regions, and CVBs need insights into the audience each social media outlet is reaching (e.g., the MTOT Facebook audience appears to be primarily former and current Montana residents), how each is influencing travel decisions (e.g., broader studies of Facebook have found that it is a poor tool for direct sales but can be a powerful tool for amplifying a brand), and how strongly they are influencing those decisions.

Insights from rigorous academic research should guide social media plans. Following trends in the industry/ trade press and benchmarking against other DMOs that are recognized for their social media activities can be useful. However, these sources of information must be viewed critically given the fact that social media is constantly evolving and a booming industry has emerged to sell related services.

For businesses and organizations, particularly those that are small, stepping into social media can seem daunting. Without a measured approach and a clear social media strategy, social media can consume an inordinate amount of time. Establishing then neglecting a social media presence can backfire, hurting the business image more than not being on social media in the first place.

Monitoring ratings and review sites (e.g. TripAdvisor, Yelp) is essential for hotels and restaurants, in particular, as many potential customers will check reviews. A number of tools can assist with monitoring the online reputation of a business or organization. Current examples include email alerts from TripAdvisor.com, Google.com, and SocialMention.com.

The use of existing social media outlets (e.g., the Montana Facebook page – www.facebook.com/visitmontana) is one effective way of supporting visitors without investing excessive time and resources. A social media strategy to plan and manage social media activity is essential to ensure that engagement delivers benefits. The Australian Tourism Data Warehouse offers a tutorial (#40) on "Social Media for Tourism" at http://www.atdw.com.au/tourismekit.aspx.

While social media is a marketing tool that is growing in importance, it is a double-edged sword. With a good product or service and high customer satisfaction, social media can amplify positive word of mouth with great effect. If, however, the product or service does not meet the standards or expectations of customers, the negative word-of-mouth will also be amplified and will be very difficult to contain. The first step in establishing a social media presence, therefore, must be ensuring the quality of the product or service.

Resources

Social media is one topic covered in several useful tutorials provided by the Australian Tourism Data Warehouse at http://www.atdw.com.au/tourismekit.aspx.
Many good tutorials can be found online. For example, search "Small Business Social Media Strategy" at www.slideshare.net for presentations given by social media professionals.

In tourism specifically, a number of commercial organizations track and evaluate the analytics of tourism promotion through social media. One example is the ongoing evaluation of state DMOs' social media presence by Gammet Interactive, LLC, available online at http://thinksocialmedia.com/category/dave-serino/

The Mercury Awards given by the U.S. Travel Association and listed at http://www.ustravel.org/member-services/award-programs/mercury-awards offer insights into social media design practices that are viewed by the tourism industry as exceptional. Bear in mind that such awards are rarely based on a rigorous methodology and may have little to do with *effectiveness*.