

5.6. Make Montana tourism a leader in online community marketing and customer advocacy

This Strategic Action strengthens Montana’s tourism marketing efforts.

Recommended Tactics

MTOT, TAC, Regions, CVBs, Communities, Tribes

- » Support businesses and organizations in developing electronic community marketing.
- » Collaborate with stakeholders to identify the “go-to” online communities for each activity/interest that offers a niche market for Montana.
- » Provide learning resources to guide stakeholders in effective electronic community marketing.
- » Include links in visitor information to blogs, community threads, etc., where community members share their enthusiasm for Montana as a setting for participating in niche activities or interests. Help these “customer advocates” speak to their peers – past and potential visitors to Montana.

Businesses & Organizations

- » Participate in the top online community(ies) related to key niche markets for your business or organization, serve as a source of accurate information, local insight, and enthusiasm for Montana as a setting for the activity/interest.
- » Link to exceptional communities, threads, and blogs that could be linked on tourism promotion sites. Make MTOT and Regions aware of these resources.

Indicators of Success

- » Montana tourism industry members are actively involved in online communities where they act as a resource for those interested in undertaking an activity or interest in Montana and promote Montana as a destination by sharing their specific knowledge and related enthusiasm. Niche markets grow in the long term through the resulting “community marketing”.
- » Trusted independent “customer advocates” (or “influencers”) provide valuable word-of-mouth promotion for Montana and contribute to the growth of niche markets.

Background & Rationale

As user generated content and social media make electronic word-of-mouth a growing force in consumer decisions, a modern form of “community marketing” is emerging.

“Community marketing” is focused on being part of the community and meeting the needs of the community – for example, a local hardware store builds a base of loyal customers by being a trusted source of knowledge. Community marketing is re-emerging within *online* communities that tie people together around a shared interest, activity, or goal.

Montana tourism is well placed to develop effective online community marketing because many tourism industry members are personally passionate about the activities or interests that draw their niche market

customers (e.g., fishing, hiking, biking, photography). Note that while each niche activity may have a small following, they can contribute significantly to overall tourism numbers. Wyoming's Office of Tourism found that niche activities *motivated* the choice of Wyoming for 47% of the state's 2012 visitors (compared to 46% of visitors motivated by visiting a national park) (<http://www.wyomingofficeoftourism.gov/industry/pdf/homepage/2012VisitorProfileStudy.pdf>, slide 16).

By participating actively in online communities serving these interests, industry members can establish themselves as a trusted source of expert or local information *and* share their enthusiasm for pursuing these activities/interests in the *superb* setting of Montana. This promotes Montana as a destination and also builds a pool of loyal customers for the stakeholder's business (e.g., lodging, guide services). This provides targeted marketing in the social media realm (targeting an online community, like avid fishermen, the way one would target a physical community like Minneapolis). The business benefits emerge over the *long-term* but are important.

Closely related to the concept of online community marketing is the Web 2.0 phenomenon of "influencers" or "customer advocates" – those who influence others through their electronic word-of-mouth recommendations. Again, Montana has a wealth of potential influencers. For any niche activity or interest that brings in non-resident visitors, there are Montanans (or admirers of Montana) who are blogging or posting on community forums with honest and passionate tales of the experiences that the state has to offer. By linking to these word-of-mouth praises, Montana allows them to provide sincere advocacy for the state as a great destination.

Resources

For an understanding of "online community marketing" see the 2012 article by Bill Lee on the Harvard Business Review Blog Network at http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2012/08/marketing_is_dead.html.

The Australian Tourism Data Warehouse "online tourism communities" tutorial provides basic information on joining and engaging in online communities at http://www.atdw.com.au/media/1523/Tutorial_42_-_Online_Tourism_Communities.pdf.