

How to Develop a Marketing Plan for Your Ecotourism Business¹

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Even as the United States and many other countries have struggled with poor economic conditions, the number of people who travel for recreation and tourism purposes has remained consistent or continues to grow (World Tourism Organization 2016). Various travel sectors support this steady increase, for example, US inbound travel, lodging and transportation demand, industry employment, and consumer confidence have shown a steady increase since 2009 (US Travel Tracker 2017). Worldwide tourism is shown to have a great impact—responsible for one out of eleven jobs and ten percent of the world's economic output (World Tourism Organization 2016).

Ecotourism is often seen as a simple business for landowners to begin because little infrastructure is needed; however, certain management skills are needed to effectively operate an ecotourism business. Simply managing an ecotourism business operation has been cited by existing ecotourism business owners as a challenge in effectively running their businesses (Best and Stein 2007). A key business skill is the ability to market one's ecotourism product or service effectively. This paper will provide insight for developing this skill by describing the contents of a marketing plan and presenting external resources to assist in ecotourism operation marketing.

Benefits of an Ecotourism Marketing Plan

A marketing plan matches the opportunities you provide in your ecotourism operation to the right market of ecotourist consumers (Goeldner and Ritchie 2009). A marketing plan includes your targeted ecotourist group, the opportunities you are providing, and how you will go about providing those opportunities (Bustam and Stein 2010). Developing a marketing plan around these components will assist you to:

1. ensure your offerings satisfy ecotourist desires while providing a profit to you;
2. identify strategies to help ecotourists access the opportunities you provide;
3. consider how to best market your opportunities based on how they relate to your potential market; and

4. consider public and private ecotourism competitors and strategies to diversify your unique ecotourism opportunities.

Key Elements of a Marketing Plan

Developing a marketing plan requires you to think in terms of using diverse approaches to communicating about your business (i.e., marketing mix). An effective ecotourism marketing mix includes the four Ps (i.e., product, price, promotion, and place) of business marketing (Perreault and McCarthy 2002) and three Ps (i.e., programming, people, and partnership) of tourism marketing (Mill and Morrison 2002).

Business Marketing Ps

Developing an effective marketing program that appeals to your target market involves understanding aspects of your business over which you have direct control. The four Ps of business marketing (product, price, promotion, and place) are factors that can be controlled within constraints of the marketing atmosphere. Leveraging these factors allows you to make marketing decisions to reach your target market and increase your business.

Product

A clearly identified ecotourism product/service (i.e., ecotourism opportunities you provide for your visitors) is the first necessity in delineating your marketing plan. Ecotourists will visit your business to attain specific experiences they cannot attain in other areas. For example, natural areas afford opportunities to learn about the environment (e.g., nature trails), relieve stress (e.g., areas to escape crowds and urban life), and bond with family and friends (e.g., family and group camping areas). This section of your plan describes your ecotourism opportunities as well as the planning, development, and implementation of these offerings. Several specific characteristics of your product or opportunity should be included in your plan and are described below.

Tourism is often considered a "service industry"; therefore, what service are you going to provide? Can you provide unique recreation activities (e.g., zip lining, gliding, or scuba diving lessons)? Your business might also offer

unique services and products to visitors. For example, agritourism operations might have a gift shop where visitors can purchase items from the farm (e.g., jams, jellies, fruits, and vegetables). Pay particular attention to the local competition and the uniqueness of your services and products as compared to these other ecotourism operators. In addition, the services you offer must be "open for business," meaning you must be able to host people on your property or locations visited. For example, consideration must be given to issues related to clearing your property free of debris for the ecotourism experiences, "front stage/back stage" offerings (i.e., access to the areas that are visible to the visitor and areas that are not), waste facilities (e.g., bathroom and kitchen), lodging, souvenirs, and a transaction area to buy tickets/goods.

Timing refers to variations in consumption of ecotourism opportunities based on holidays and high/low seasons. For example, unless you offer water-based recreation, Florida's summer is not a time people want to spend significant time outside. Your opportunities might be best offered in the fall, winter, and spring.

Ecotourism opportunities often require packaging of amenities (e.g., lodging, food service, transportation) to offer a convenient and competitive experience. For example, ecotour operators might combine canoe/kayak experiences with camping at local state parks, while agritour operators might package with local bed and breakfasts.

Perceptions of ecotourism operators are a result of reputation and perceived quality. Careful consideration for the image being delivered through marketing messages may result in positive ecotourist perceptions of your ecotourism business. For instance, you may choose to present an image that attracts a particular market group (e.g., families, retirees, solo ecotourists), reflects a certain activity type (e.g., high adventure, cultural tourism, agritourism), or represents a specific experience outcome (e.g., relaxation, solitude, thrill).

Providing exemplary customer service for quality ecotourism experiences can prove advantageous in establishing a positive image. For example, excellent customer service includes more than friendliness and helpfulness, such as quality delivery of ecotourism services (e.g., highly qualified guides, low guest to guide training ratio, diverse lodging/food service amenities). Quality delivery of such services can lead to customer satisfaction, loyalty for repeat business, and long-term profitability.

A common concern of landowners interested in establishing an ecotourism venture is liability. The state of Florida identifies three types of entrants on landowner property: invitees, licensees, and trespassers. An invitee is someone who received an invitation from the landowner to enter the property (e.g., a paying ecotourist), a licensee

is akin to a social guest, and a trespasser is someone who enters without permission (Roca 2010). To minimize liability, landowners are responsible to warn invitees of dangers while on their property as well as maintain the property in a safe condition (Roca 2010). To further improve opportunities for agricultural operations to develop agritourism businesses, in 2013, the Florida Legislature changed Florida statutes to reduce liability for agritourism farms on the condition that host farms post warning signs with specific wording (Henry 2016; UF IFAS Extension Service 2015).

There are several practices landowners can implement to minimize their liability. For example, landowners may choose to invest in liability insurance. Typically, policies provide protection against injury, guest liability, and contractual language (Jones, Hamilton, and Megalos 2005). While lawsuits may be rare, acquisition of liability insurance is a worthwhile consideration when allowing paid visitors onto your property (Francesconi and Stein 2008). For more information on liability insurance providers, landowners should contact their existing insurance company, local tourism office, or chamber of commerce. Other practices landowners can take to minimize liability include proper posting of landownership boundaries following state regulations, warning consumers on your property of the associated risks (e.g., uneven terrain, unstable rock cliffs, guard dogs, hunters and their locations, ongoing timber harvesting), fencing or removing attractive nuisances (e.g., water areas, docks, unsafe buildings, mechanical equipment), and seeking legal advice before entering into written agreements (Jones et al. 2005).

Research on ecotourists' geographic, demographic, and psychographic differences is needed for ecotourism marketing success. Research should aim to answer the following: who are the present/potential ecotourists and where do they come from, what are their likes/dislikes, what are their destination preferences, what is your competitive situation, what are the likely future trends in the ecotourism market, what are the prospects for increasing demand, what kind of marketing program do you need, and how will such programs be implemented (Goeldner and Ritchie 2009)? Consideration should also be granted for how much to spend on research and the frequency of conducting that research.

Pricing is important in meeting ecotourist demands and satisfying your profit margins. There are several options available when it comes to using a pricing scheme. These options include selling at, below, or above the current market price. Pricing strategies must be paired with factors that influence pricing, such as product quality (i.e., consistent supply of products/services at an acceptable quality level), competition (other private business owners as well as publicly owned natural attractions in the local area offering similar products/services), distribution of

products/services and consumers, cost (e.g., capital and maintenance costs), seasonality (i.e., the annual ebb and flow of product/service consumption), and profit margin (i.e., the sum of net profit and total operating expenses). Pricing strategies also must consider strategies for new opportunities such as price skimming (i.e., charging high prices to maximize profit in the short run) and penetration pricing (i.e., introducing your product/service at a low price to gain the majority of the market) (Bustam and Stein 2010; Goeldner and Ritchie 2009).

Promotion

Promotion is used to create demand for a service or product, attract attention, create interest or desire, and generate action in order to sell that service/product (Goeldner and Ritchie 2009). This section of the plan is where you identify your preferred promotional approaches.

A product brand is a distinguishable name or symbol (e.g., a logo) to differentiate your opportunities from those of your competitors (Aaker 1991). Branding ecotourism operations is particularly unique since the term "ecotourism" implies the business focuses on conserving the environment, benefiting local residents, and promoting responsible travel (The International Ecotourism Society 2017, <https://ecotourism.org/>). Some ecotourism operators seek assistance in promoting their operations by using established brands. Such a brand is offered by the Florida Society for Ethical Ecotourism (FL SEE). Through its certification program, FL SEE works to recognize service providers who are "committed to using best practices for ecological sustainability, natural areas management, and quality ecotourism experiences" (Florida Society for Ethical Ecotourism 2017).

Advertising is paid promotion and includes consideration of when, where, and how to promote ecotourism opportunities. Paid promotions attract consumers to the ecotourism opportunities being sold and employ media such as internet, newspapers, television, magazines, radio, and outdoor advertising (Goeldner and Ritchie 2009).

This technique involves personal communication with ecotourist consumers/distribution channels and is used to create consumer demand and inspire selling of ecotourism opportunities (Goeldner and Ritchie 2009). For instance, ecotourism operators offering multiple, individually priced tours might rely on this strategy to inform their consumers of other tour options available to them.

Since ecotourism is a "people business," priority must be centered on public interest during decision-making. As such, fostering a philosophy that is public-centered within your ecotourism business and establishing policies for this ethic will aid in promoting your ecotourism services/products to meet ecotourist needs and wants.

The use of social media for communication is an increasing trend. Formal outlets such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, as well as informal outlets such as blogs and wikis, provide a platform for marketing your ecotourism business on the internet. Consideration of a social media plan which addresses the outlet(s) and the information (e.g., text, graphics, downloadable materials) you choose to communicate will add greater depth to your marketing plan that meets the technological trend.

Place

Place is concerned with getting information about your ecotourism operation and access to the opportunities you provide to your target audience. Strategically planning your approach for supplying information about why and how to access your ecotourism business will maintain the demand for your ecotourism services.

Distribution channels (e.g., travel agents, internet sales) are used to match your ecotourism opportunities with potential ecotourists. For instance, you would analyze potential channels by sales, costs, and profits, determine the outcomes you can expect, and identify the number of channels necessary to sell your opportunities.

The geographic area refers to the location of your ecotourism operation and the extent of your marketing strategies beyond this area. How far from this area will you extend your distribution channels and advertising strategies? For example, an agritourism operator may choose to limit his or her channels to simply word-of-mouth advertising in the community or working with local school groups. In contrast, a canopy tour operator may choose to package his or her services with a cave diving operator to offer excursions in various Florida locations, use state-wide travel agents to assist in sales of their packaged ecotourism opportunities, and advertise their ecotourism offerings through a state-wide campaign.

Tourism Marketing Ps

The marketing mix also includes consideration for marketing factors specific to the tourism industry (i.e., programming, people, and partnership). Consideration of these factors allows you to provide greater definition of the ecotourism experience offered and market these experiences for business success.

Programming

As a business owner, your goal is to increase consumer spending and the best way to do this is to diversify your product. Programming focuses on the activities you would implement to establish your uniqueness and inspire ecotourist participation in your ecotourism offerings. Programming options include special activities, themed events, or education programs. For example, ecotourism operators offering horseback riding may provide guided night rides for stargazing as a special activity, agritourism businesses may offer haunted sleigh rides during

Halloween as a themed event, and nature tour operators might invite a local wildlife expert to share their knowledge in a distinctive education program.

People

Ecotourism is a people business, in that consumers expect a distinctive experience from their participation. Here you would consider the market group that would use your products/services (e.g., individuals/families, particular skill levels), any additional services required (accessibility, food service, lodging), the varying characteristics influential on participation (age, interests, desired experiences), the location of these consumers (proximity to your business), and how to best communicate with them (internet, newspaper, radio, television, brochures). Recognizing that not all consumers are alike will give you the advantage to funnel your marketing efforts towards a specific target market in delivery of that distinctive experience.

Partnerships

Ecotourism operators wishing to expand or open a new business without the resources to do so might find partnerships a viable option. Partnerships recognize the interdependence between stakeholders in delivering ecotourism experiences and allow for collaboration.

Typical partnerships in the Florida ecotourism industry are operated by public-private partnerships. Public land management agencies (e.g., National Park Service, State Park Service, and county parks) focus heavily on conservation and protection of the lands they manage; therefore, they are unable to accommodate much of what ecotourists might desire. These agencies are routinely looking for partnership opportunities with the private sector to better accommodate ecotourist demands.

Other options exist in delivering ecotourism opportunities and depend on the size/structure of your ecotourism business. Private-private partnerships consist of ecotourism operators pooling resources to offer package deals. For example, a local farm might offer a unique tour of its pastures and undeveloped sites, and the farmer would partner with a local restaurant or caterer to provide a barbecue at the end of the tour.

Additional options exist in regards to marketing partnerships. For example, many ecotourism operators rely on their local convention and visitors bureaus (CVBs) to assist in marketing their ecotourism business (see below for discussion). Because the local CVB is the first internet stop for many ecotourist consumers, partnering with the local CVB for business marketing may result in fruitful economic returns.

These marketing plan components provide insight into the detailed consideration required for developing ecotourism marketing strategies. The marketing mix can be planned

for and achieved independently; however, there are external resources available to help in developing your plan.

Marketing Assistance

Preparing a marketing plan can be a daunting task. Fortunately, there are several external resources available to assist you in developing and implementing a plan. These resources include tourism and travel organizations at the international, national, state, and county/city level. For instance, international marketing support is provided by TIES, where tools and tips for effective marketing are offered as well as member opportunities to advertise on the TIES website (www.ecotourism.org). National marketing support is available from the Travel and Tourism Research Association where members are provided with educational resources and publications on marketing topics as well as networking opportunities through national and regional conferences (www.ttra.com).

For Florida businesses, marketing support is offered by the Florida Tourism Industry Marketing Corporation where ecotourism operators are provided the opportunity to advertise their businesses through a tourist planning website (www.visitflorida.com) and print materials. Lastly, marketing support is available locally with the Florida Association of Convention and Visitor Bureaus, where ecotourism operators advertise their tourism offerings on a destination marketing organization website (<https://www.visitflorida.com/en-us/florida-meeting-planners/florida-convention-visitors-bureaus.html>) and provide promotional materials to CVBs.

Conclusion

On first impression, an ecotourism business may seem like a simple business to start, with little infrastructure required; however, management skills, such as marketing competency, are necessary to effectively operate such a business. Marketing is important to ecotourism business development, implementation, and continued success as it brings ecotourism opportunities from the operator to the ecotourist. Careful consideration of the specific details of a marketing plan is warranted for your ecotourism business to be effective in communicating your opportunities to the best fitting ecotourist market. Practicing the steps you identify in your marketing plan will assist you in gaining the managerial acumen required for successfully operating an ecotourism business.

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¹ This document is FOR278, one of a series of the School of Forest, Fisheries, and Geomatics Sciences, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date December 2010. Revised August 2013, January 2017, and July 2020. Visit the EDIS website at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu> for the currently supported version of this publication.

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