



Michigan Tourism Strategic Plan

"a plan for the industry, by the industry"

Visitor Experience

IWT Report to the Council

November 2, 2006

Section 1: **Overview**

The visitor experience team is comprised of the following individuals:

Bill Anderson, Michigan Department of History, Arts and Libraries (Chair)
Teresa Goforth, Michigan Museums Association (Vice Chair)
Gregory Hokans, Mackinac State Historic Parks
Bill Shepler, Shepler's Mackinac Island Ferry
Melissa Morang, Great Lakes Crossing - Taubman Centers, Inc
Brandon Schroder, Michigan Sea Grant
Marci Fogal, Blue Water Area CVB
Camille Jourden-Mark, Michigan's Adventure Amusement Park
Brenda Plakmeyer, MotorCities National Heritage Area
Pat Stewart, Michigan Department of Natural Resources
Dave Smyth, Travel Michigan
Bill Knudson, Michigan State University

The visitor experience begins with the process of planning and arranging the destination trip and ends when the person(s) returns home and includes the totality of the experience encompassing what the location tries to manage and what is out of its control. The marketing message is part of the experience – it sets the expectations. Key elements of the visitor experience include, but are not limited to the quality of service provided, products consumed, physical and emotional engagement the venues, and memories formed.

A positive visitor experience is the hallmark of a successful tourism industry. It can lead to repeat business and invaluable word of mouth advertising. A positive visitor experience is the result of all the different facets of the Michigan tourism industry working together to meet and exceed the visitor's expectations. Given the influence of technology and Disney, the bar of visitor experience expectation has been raised. If Michigan is going to be competitive in attracting visitors, we must offer visitor experiences that are engaging and memorable. In order to insure a positive visitor experience, public and private investment must be made in:

1. Infrastructure that improves and adds to the visitor experience.
2. Education and training of personnel involved in the provision of the visitor experience.
3. New and creative methods of packaging and providing tourism goods and services.

This issue statement was generated in an attempt to capture all the aspects of the visitor experience as well as the realization that customers have become more aware of tourism alternatives and have developed higher expectations of tourism goods and services.

Section 2: **Challenges and Opportunities**

Situation Analysis

As part of its mission the visitor experience team completed an analysis of perceived strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT). In the case, strengths are internal aspects of the Michigan tourism sector that are positive attributes for the development of the industry. Weaknesses are internal aspects of the Michigan tourism sector that need to be improved and retard the development of the industry. Opportunities are forces that foster a positive environment for the Michigan tourism industry and threats are outside forces that create challenges for the industry.

Strengths

1. Good product-need to translate into experience
2. Great Lakes –coasts (recreational, cultural-maritime)
3. Available access
 - a. Lighthouses
 - b. Boat launches
 - c. Inland lakes
 - d. Accessible water falls
 - e. Rivers
4. Affordable
5. Rich variety of possible experiences and many historical locations
 - a. Mines
 - b. Autos
 - c. Cultural
6. Variety seasons
7. Outstanding golf

Weaknesses

1. Don't do enough for women
2. Don't do enough to attract out of state tourism
3. Need to broaden products to attract outsiders
4. Lack of research on outside markets and niche markets
5. Cultural experiences too passive and too static
6. Experiences may not be competitive with other states' offerings
7. Underdeveloped opportunities/authentic; e.g., underground railroad
8. Not always ready for visitors. Tend to think of experience through our own eyes
9. instead of visitors eyes.
10. Difficulty of getting from place to place (especially long drives).
11. Lack of support for people interested in the outdoors and other experiences but who are beginners in these activities.
12. Don't do enough for minorities/and non native English speakers
13. Lack of integration of destinations

Opportunities

1. Friendly people
2. Increase in the value of the Canadian dollar has led to an increase in Canadian tourism.
3. Increase in the number of Germans.
4. Technology
 - a. Wireless internet
 - b. Virtual tools
 - c. Research on niche markets.
5. Integrate the visitor experience (e.g. culture and natural resources).
6. Increase the variety of experience/make the transfer of experience easier.

7. Increase the demand through exceptional product and enhanced marketing.

Threats

1. Border issues
 - a. Time it takes to cross the bridge
 - b. Passport requirements
2. Difficult economic situation/lack of a sustaining marketing budget for statewide promotion.
3. Price of gas/difficulty of getting from one place to another.
4. Global warming
 - a. Lack of snow in the winter.
 - b. Fluctuating lake levels
5. Competition from other locations.

Section 3: **Recommendations**

There are several recommended ways that Michigan can significantly improve the visitor experience:

1. *Establish a culture of exceptional customer service.*

This culture begins with a commitment from the top down and permeates visitor venues throughout the state. It is the modus operandi of the people who provide the service. It incorporates a service philosophy of exceeding customer expectations. A service culture is an attitude. This also includes the development of a distinct theme and perhaps identifying a spokesperson to promote that theme. It is important to sell the culture to the industry as well as to the visitor, and to deliver on the promise implicit in the culture's message.
2. *Achieve the actualization of a superior service model.*

A model that this recommendation advocates includes four components: delivery, selling, guest and theme. These crucial elements must be integrated in order to be effective. Identifying best practices, training all service providers and obeying the culture are prerequisites to success. Successful venues practice the culture – you can touch and feel it.
3. *Make the visitor experience more engaging and memorable.*

Throughout the country there is a rapidly emerging new paradigm focused on providing more hands-on, interactive and memorable visitor experiences. Although education is core, we must increase the entertainment value of the visitor experience if we are to attract the 21st century visitor and compete with other attractions.
4. *Establish a best practices web site to share and celebrate exceptional visitor experiences.*

Travel Michigan or Michigan State University could develop a standard best practices format and host a searchable site.
5. *Enhance the environment (setting).*

This includes establishing a vision for the state. There are three aspects of the environment: natural, built and institutional. The natural environment is perhaps what Michigan is most known for: lakes, woods, hunting, fishing, snowmobiling, and other activities that are related to the natural resource assets the state possesses. The built environment refers to the state's infrastructure (roads and parks), golf courses, trails, cultural attractions and other facilities. We also have an institutional environment shaped by regulations and laws. Michigan's visitor environment can be enhanced in numerous ways through our stewardship, maintenance, development and improved way finding.

6. *Create an image of what Michigan has.*

Our desired image is what we are, what we represent and what makes us unique. Our image is reflected in our brand.

In order to create a culture and improve the tourist environment a practical plan of action must be in place. This plan needs to consider both the individual and the industry, and ownership of the plan by the industry is very important. The first step is to identify the stakeholders of the plan. Focus groups and other methods of data collection can be used to determine the current culture and methods that would be effective in enhancing the culture and environment to enhance the visitor experience. Additional information is needed on what constitutes the visitor experience and what tourists are looking for in a travel destination. Although the realization of some of our goals will surely take many years, we need to begin in earnest expecting to make a significant impact within three years.

Budget

Training for improving customer service and the visitor's experience with the attraction. One methodology we recommend is to train and certify a cadre of trainers who would then be available to train the employees of various tourism businesses and venues. An annual budget of \$60,000 with the state providing the cost of training the trainers and a 50 percent incentive to encourage the local business/venue investment in a training program is needed.

Highway and corridor infrastructure improvements – The recent design and construction of a number of bridges by the Michigan Department of Transportation demonstrates the potential impact of these structures and how the beautification of strategically located roadways using flowers and landscaping and regularly mowed grass can enhance the image of our state. States like Texas and Virginia offer strong examples of how infrastructure assets cause positive and lasting impressions. There is also a need for improving way finding aids to help visitors find our many attractions. Hopefully more transportation funds can be prioritized for this kind of infrastructure enhancement.

Section 4: The Process

We tried to accommodate participation by using a combination of in person and conference call connections for those located a considerable distance from Lansing. Likewise we made regular use of email to solicit input and reaction as we crafted various pieces of the report. Through this process we completed our primary charge yet fell a little short on defining action steps that would implement our proposed goals.