

HOW TO GUIDE:

02. ENHANCE EXPERIENCES

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ENHANCE EXPERIENCES

INTRODUCTION

The famous line from the movie *Field of Dreams*, “if you build it, they will come,” proved true in typical Hollywood fashion. But is that the case for travel and tourism operators? If you build it, will they come?

Maybe. That said, if you don’t build it, they most definitely won’t be coming.

Winning tomorrow in travel and tourism requires developing and delivering more and better experiences for travelers. Even visitors returning year after year expect something different.

More and more tourism organizations are turning their efforts toward planning and development — to the point where the DMO acronym is even shifting to stand for Destination Management Organization, rather than Destination Marketing Organization. Of course, marketing will always be an essential part of the tourism landscape, but industry leaders are realizing that helping to enhance experiences goes hand-in-hand with selling a destination or attraction. So, now that you better know who you are and how you’re trying to position yourself, let’s focus on what will bring your offering to the next level.

**All DRIVE 2.0 research was conducted in 2019 and compiled pre COVID-19 Crisis.
Please see vatc.org/coronavirus for COVID-19: Industry Response Toolkit.**

STEP 1: ASSESS YOUR NEED

Maybe you don't need to do anything right this second. Or perhaps you're in dire need of new experiences. You won't know for sure until you assess where you are and start asking some important questions:

- Are your destinations, attractions, restaurants, hotels, and other travel-based businesses thriving? Is business up versus a year ago? What are the five-year trends? Do you have localities in your region that have ignored tourism opportunities while others are prospering?
- Who visits? Where do they come from? What do they do while visiting? What are their expectations and are they being met? What do residents want?

STEP 2: INVENTORY ASSETS TO LEVERAGE

Once you better understand your specific needs, inventory your existing products (places to go) and experiences (things to do), with a keen eye toward what may not be fully meeting the desires of visitors and residents.

For example, are there enough hotels, at the right locations, with the right price points? How about restaurant options? Finding yourself lacking in certain assets doesn't necessarily mean you need to go and build more hotels. It may mean you need more events and experiences to draw people to fill the rooms you have. That said, even if you don't have enough in place already, once you develop the right products and experiences, the market will likely seize the opportunity to build and meet the growing need spurred by your tourism efforts. Think about how developing ATV trails in St. Paul created new opportunities for businesses: ATV rental companies, new lodging, and new dining experiences.

Develop as comprehensive a list as possible of events, festivals, activities, products, and experiences. Then you're ready for step 3.



STEP 3: IDENTIFY GAPS

The gaps your needs assessment and inventory may uncover typically point to two things: **What you need to build, and ways to better leverage what you already have.** With each gap, you must ask yourself: Does filling this void require something new, or just some strategic thinking?

Sometimes you may find more than enough assets at play in your region — they’re simply not playing well together. Perhaps those bike trails can link up with other nearby networks through better collaboration and promotion? Maybe your local brewery scene is really part of a larger trail that, when packaged effectively, can bring more people and spending without having to build anything? Or, let’s say your community has an organization planning and producing weekend events, only they’re not coordinating with other planners and venues in the region. Could you help them better connect and communicate so October isn’t booked solid, while November has nothing on the calendar?

By creating a chart with what you already have in place, what you want, and what you think you’ll need in the future, you can quickly see the gaps and prioritize where to focus.



STEP 4: SLOW YOUR ROLL

Before you dash off and build new assets or create new events, make sure you are well-positioned to ensure success. That starts with making sure that what you're developing is **1) consistent with your story and positioning, and 2) furthers the whole of your offering**. For example, adding a punk rock club to The Crooked Road may not be as prudent as adding a brewery next to an existing music venue. Here are some best practices to keep in mind:

- Make sure you have a local “champion” in place. Someone, or a small group of people, must own the effort. It can be you, but it’s better if your plans have local community support. **(In How to Guide #3: Recruit Partners, we’ll address how to find and recruit partners.)**
- Double-check that your new asset or events follow best practices in travel and tourism today. For example, are they easy for everyone to access? Are they unique and new relative to current options? Are they multi-seasonal? Do they add to your current portfolio or simply replace something? Is it filling a void? Has a feasibility study been done, or does one need to be performed?
- Don’t go it alone. Identify and recruit local partners, business leaders, and entrepreneurs who can help you realize your goals, find funding, and make your case for tourism investments. Our three remaining guides — **“Recruit Partners,” “Find Funding,” and “Make Your Case” — can help you accomplish these feats.**
- For new product development, plan how you’ll measure success so the return on investment (ROI) is baked in from the start. By designing the project with ROI in mind, you’ll be much farther down the road toward additional funding sources once you launch your new effort.
- Once you have a champion (or, preferably, champions) in place and you’re following best practices, go forth!





NELSON COUNTY: BUILDING A DIFFERENT KIND OF TRAIL

Visitors have always been drawn to Nelson County for its pristine beauty and abundant outdoor recreational opportunities. But what if there were a way to give more visitors access to its natural splendor without having to strap on the skis or cinch up the hiking boots?

When Maureen Kelley arrived at the Nelson County Office of Economic Development in 2002, that's exactly what she aimed to do, and after building political support and partnerships with farmers and producers in the established craft alcohol industry, the Nelson 151 Coalition was soon formed among 11 local craft alcohol producers to more efficiently market and leverage their position and proximity to each other.

Today, the Nelson 151 Coalition consists of six wineries, four breweries, two cideries, and one distillery — all within 15 miles of each other — creating a veritable craft beverage trail to go along with the area's hiking, biking, and skiing trails, not to mention its orchards and farms, golf courses, bed and breakfasts and unique shopping experiences.

According to Kelley, when she started in 2002, the Nelson County Visitors Center would draw roughly 5,000 visitors a year. Now, that number climbs past 25,000 annually, and the success of the Nelson 151 trail has led to the county developing and supporting other, more specific "trails" throughout the region, including:

- The Brew Ridge Trail, which is comprised of breweries spanning Nelson and Albemarle counties;
- The Blue Ridge Fruit Loop, which includes a dozen farms and orchards throughout the region; and
- Nelson 29, a similar "micro-coalition" along a less-traveled road in Nelson County that is made up of three wineries, two breweries (Blue Mountain Barrel House and Wood Ridge Farm Brewery), and one distillery.

Kelley said she hopes the success of the Nelson 29 trail will mirror that of Nelson 151 and eventually help to revitalize the county seat of Lovingston (situated on Route 29). Similarly, she said she's optimistic that a new lodging facility will host a culinary apprenticeship program capable of generating more skilled workers to meet the growing demand Nelson 151 has helped to spur in the food services industry as well.



ROANOKE: BRINGING THE OUTDOOR NARRATIVE TO LIFE

Prior to 2008, the Roanoke Regional Partnership (RRP), a joint venture between regional city and county governments, spent much of its time trying to recruit manufacturers to the region to replace the ones who had left throughout the previous two-and-a-half decades. However, these efforts were often met with little success, leaving the region's economic future seemingly in doubt.

One thing that had never been in doubt, however, was the region's natural assets, which could become the backbone of a differentiating narrative for the city — one centered around outdoor recreation.

To help bring that narrative to life, the RRP formed the Roanoke Outside Foundation, which set about inventorying Roanoke's outdoor recreation assets and identifying gaps in the outdoor experiences Roanoke offered — chief among them being that, for all its natural splendor, the region had little in the way of intentional signature outdoor events and experiences to draw people in.

Initially, according to Pete Eshelman, Director of the Roanoke Outside Foundation and Director of Outdoor Branding for the Roanoke Regional Partnership, the events it sought to put on were more for brand awareness building, not necessarily tourism draws. Turns out, they've been both, led by the Blue Ridge Marathon, which has contributed \$5 million to the regional economy over the last 10 years.

Other events launched and sustained since the creation of the foundation include the GoOutside Festival, a free event that allows people to try out gear, witness demonstrations, and check out music and outdoor recreational events, and the Blue Ridge GO Cross Race, which kicks off the UCI international cyclocross and USA Cycling's ProCX racing calendars in North America.

Beyond these events, however, the assets inventory turned up another opportunity to bring recognition to the area through a signature outdoor experience — mountain biking.

As Catherine Fox, Vice President of Public Affairs and Destination Development for Visit Virginia's Blue Ridge (VVBR), notes, as industry leaders looked at what it would take to earn recognition from the International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA), it became clear that with a little intentional development and coordination, the Roanoke region could offer something special for mountain biking enthusiasts that no one on the East Coast could match.

The process started by logging the essential characteristics of its mountain biking offering, such as how many miles of trails were available and the features of those trails — elevation variation, difficulty levels, etc. On top of that, however, the IMBA also needed to know some essential characteristics of the region, such as how many bike repair shops were located there, how many lodging options allowed for bike storage in the rooms, and how many repair stations were situated along the trails themselves.

With that inventory in place, VVBR and its partners were able to help new entrepreneurs meet demand and help existing business owners develop strategies to make their businesses appealing and sustainable — for example, having a coffee shop connected to a bike repair shop, or having breweries in place for riders to unwind after a long day on the trails.

"It was all very grassroots," Fox says. "The community saw the potential, saw the amenities we had, and decided to build on that rather than create something new."

And the community's efforts have paid off, as the IMBA designated the region a Silver-Level Ride Center — the only region in the Eastern U.S. to earn that level of distinction — which serves as a draw not only for visitors, but also potential businesses and residents, and adds legitimacy to the region's claim as America's East Coast Mountain Biking Capital.



ST. PAUL: FINDING RENEWAL IN A NEW RECREATIONAL TRAIL SYSTEM

In late 2006, VTC, community organizers and government officials in Southwest Virginia came together to explore the demand and feasibility of a multi-use trail system. Could a trail system bring in all-terrain vehicle riders from throughout the Eastern United States and beyond? The answer they found now drives the community today.

Known collectively as the Spearhead Trails and now encompassing more than 400 miles of trail systems connecting communities throughout the region, the first trail in the system opened in St. Paul in 2013, and the results were nearly instantaneous.

Within the first year, the Southwest Regional Recreation Authority, which oversees the trail system, sold 3,500 trail permits, and a 2014 Bristol Herald Courier article examining the trail's impact stated there had been \$1 million in private investment in St. Paul as a direct result of its first year of operation.

According to estimates from the U.S. Travel Association, through June 30, 2017, the cumulative impact of Spearhead Trails was almost \$22 million. For FY 2016-17, in Russell and Wise Counties, where St. Paul is located, visitation to the Spearhead Trails supported approximately 94 full-time equivalent jobs, and out-of-area visitors to the trails spent an estimated \$6.7 million across the Commonwealth.

However, the impact of this trail system on a town like St. Paul isn't measured solely in economic terms. It's also measured in community pride and what those who call St. Paul home see outside their windows every day — more visitors riding ATVs down the streets and new restaurants and lodging options opening, punctuated by the 2018 opening of the \$7.8 million Western Front Hotel in the heart of downtown.

That project received state and federal historic tax credits, grants from the Department of Housing and Community Development, the Virginia Tourism Growth Fund, and the Appalachian Regional Commission, and loans from Virginia Tobacco Region Revitalization Commission, the Virginia Coalfield Economic Development Authority and the Virginia Community Development Corp. None of that would have been possible if there hadn't been a concerted effort to enhance the experiences that draw people in for weekend and overnight stays.

"I always knew that this town had a lot going for it, even when it was covered in coal dust and boarded up storefronts," says Jennifer Bailey, owner of Sugar Hill Brewery. "I could see the potential in this town. Now I feel like other people are finally catching that vision."

"Spearhead Trails' Mountain View ATV Trail system has helped to change Southwest Virginia in a lot of ways," says Andrea Hicks, Marketing and Media Coordinator for the Town of St. Paul. "In addition to the trail system, it took a town willing to think outside the box and take a chance to make this work successfully. It was absolutely necessary to get the town on board, to become ATV friendly, and to say yes to trying something new. The partnership between Spearhead Trails and St. Paul has led to some incredible opportunities Southwest Virginia wasn't afforded before. Investments, dedication, and hard work have brought an award-winning brewery and a boutique hotel to town, as well as a celebrity chef-owned restaurant. Yes, St. Paul is small. Yes, it's in a rural area. But because the town was unwilling to lose hope after the coal industry started to decline, the town of St. Paul is being recognized worldwide and visitors are coming from all over."



FARMVILLE/PRINCE EDWARD COUNTY: SPURRING GROWTH THROUGH INTENTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

As the largest municipality between Richmond and Lynchburg, Farmville and the surrounding area of Prince Edward County has always been on the travel radar. Plus, being home to Hampden-Sydney College and Longwood University has traditionally helped bring visitors to the area as well.

However, town and civic leaders knew they had more than that to offer. So, a little more than a decade ago, they began intentionally building resources designed to tap into two of its major assets — its bevy of natural resources to treasure and its vital role in the history of the country’s Civil Rights movement.

In 2006, the town announced the start of what would become the 31-mile-long High Bridge Trail State Park, which attracts hikers, joggers, horseback riders, and cyclists year-round to take in the scenic beauty of the area. The same year the trail was finished, in 2012, Sandy River Outdoor Adventures opened, offering visitors unique outdoor ropes courses, and in the years since, it too has grown to include gear rentals, guided trips and unique lodging experiences, including cabins and glamping tipis.

2012 also marked the final renovations of the Robert Russa Moton Museum. Housed in the former Robert Russa Moton High School, the museum, now a fixture on the U.S. Civil Rights Trail launched in 2018, helps to shine a light on a seminal piece of American history — the student walkout at Moton High and the prolonged resistance to school desegregation on the behalf of many Southern communities, and Farmville in particular.

Initially undertaken as a stand against the clearly unequal conditions of the segregated all-black school, the Moton strike in 1951 soon helped challenge the entire premise of “separate but equal” entirely, as the Davis v. School Board of Prince Edward County suit, named for a ninth-grade participant in the Moton strike, became one of the five cases combined as Brown v. Board of Education. And, through exhibits detailing this and other important Civil Rights landmarks and events, the museum attracts not only school groups and historians, but people everywhere who work to carry on those lessons today.

With these two anchor draws — outdoor adventure and Black heritage — as well as Longwood University’s master plan updates in 2014 to establish better connections with the downtown area and the Moton Museum, visitation has steadily increased since 2006, bringing with it roughly \$9.17 million in increased expenditures between 2006 and 2018.

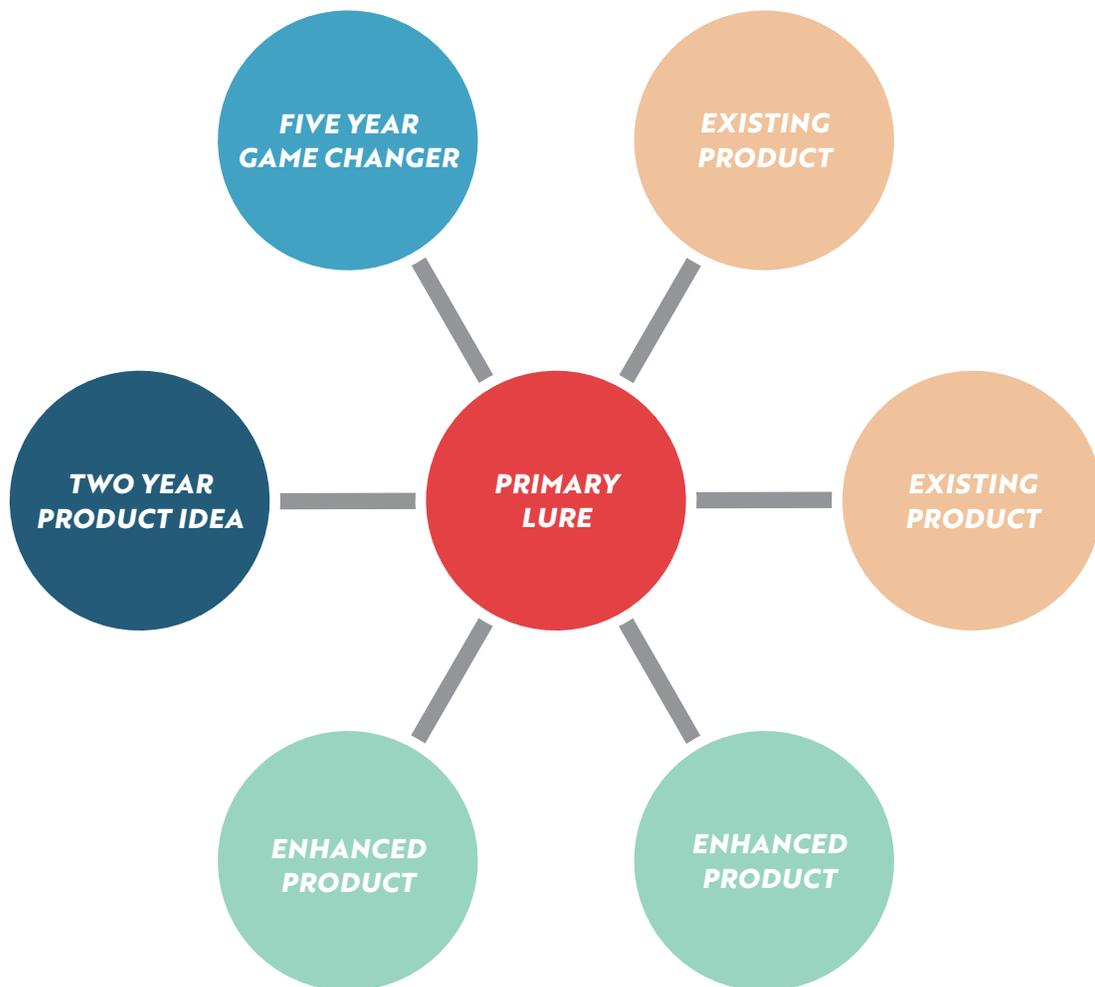
As visitation has increased, however, it also became clear to area leaders that more lodging options were needed to go along with the cafes, brewery, and other businesses that were growing to serve those visitors. To that end, utilizing the VTC Tourism Development Financing Program, the Hotel Weyanoke was built, and in 2018, its first year of operation, Prince Edward County expenditures saw a 12.7% increase, which was the highest in the state and nearly three times the state average.

ENHANCE EXPERIENCES HUB AND SPOKE EXERCISE

POPULATING YOUR HUB AND SPOKE

Any additions or improvements to your offering must also work to enhance your region's overall story, not complicate or distract from it. **That story is your central hub** — the thing that differentiates you and showcases your primary lures. From there, work clockwise around the spokes: What can be done to solidify your strongest existing products? What parts of your offering are on the verge but could use a little enhancement to take them to the next level? And, finally, what's something new that could take your region or attraction to the next level — both in the short-term and long-term?

Sometimes, finding innovative and engaging ways to tie existing experiences and products together can have lasting effects as well. By working together and building experiences that reinforce and strengthen the hub, the right mix of products, attractions, and activities can revitalize your tourism business.





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