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NH Grand and Your Small Business
“What is the branding program doing for me?”

Branding Background:

A brand is something an area is known for. A brand can be good or bad. When thinking of Hershey, Pennsylvania or Orlando, Florida, what comes to mind? If Hershey Chocolate factory and Disney World were the first thoughts that came to mind, the marketing team in both areas deserves a pat on the back. These associations are exactly what the brand designers are going for – a place to vacation and receive a very specific product.

Northern New Hampshire is very similar to the North Woods of Maine or the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. This brand doesn't set us apart from our competition and doesn't do a good job of marketing what is really here. In the Summer, 2006 edition of *Yankee Magazine*, Maine receives front cover recognition for being “New England's Last Wild Place.” The photos used in the article could easily be transferred to describe Anywhere, Northern N.H. To create a brand that visitors would make the trip to experience, we needed to set ourselves apart.

What sets northern New Hampshire apart? The three remaining Grand Hotels; which are as much a part of the northern culture as farming the forest or hunting and fishing camps. At one point in our history, there were over 200 Grand Hotels, Inns or Boarding Houses that welcomed visitors who made the scenic train ride north to enjoy their northern playground. With three grand hotels in one county, that makes it the highest concentration of any state other than Florida. There still needs to be a draw for the visitor, something experiential, that will entice them to make the 3-4 hour journey north. The list of Grand Adventures was made to fulfill this purpose.

“We need something specific to draw people to the area,” said Samantha Kenney Maltais, who was hired by the Northern Community Investment Corporation in June to manage this project. “If we market things that are similar to what people can get closer to home, they won’t bother to make the drive.”

Grand Adventures are vetted on very specific criteria that are meant to “raise the bar.” The entire brand rests on the Grand Adventures and it is crucial that these businesses or experiences be “truly grand.” If a visitor has a bad experience at a business that has been endorsed as a “Grand Adventure,” this may jeopardize the credibility of the rest of the brand. In order for this project to work, the businesses must deliver on the brand promise of being “truly grand.” The NH Grand project currently has eight Certified Grand Adventures, but would like to raise that number to twenty within the next few years.

So what do the visitors do when they aren’t out riding the Cog Railway or enjoying a day at Santa’s Village? According to Destination Development International, 80% of visitor spending takes place in what is known as “diversionary activities.” These activities are the retail shops, dining establishments, and entertainment businesses of the area, many of these are small businesses. To help with the marketing of these types of businesses, the NH Grand project created a “Certified Best of NH Grand” list. This list has 22 (we are looking to increase it to 25) of some of the best destination businesses in Northern N.H.

How Small Businesses Benefit:

There is still plenty of room to grow this program. Part of the goal of the NH Grand project is to help small businesses in the area to succeed so that they meet the criteria set forth to insure the integrity of the brand and we are able to certify them as a Grand Adventure of Certified Best Of NH Grand.

In July, Roger Brooks of Destination Development traveled to the area to complete a business technical assistance program with ten area businesses geographically spaced throughout northern N.H. These businesses were given advice on curb appeal, retail mix, and general low-cost fixes that would increase their foot traffic through the door.

Think of a recent vacation that you took. How many times during your trip did you say, “That looks like a good place to eat” or “There was this really cute shop...”?

Dube’s Pittstop in Pittsburg and Wright Cut Salon in Whitefield both received help from Brooks and because of their improvements have seen an increase in their out of town visitors.

When the first round of technical assistance is completed, a new round will start. This round consists of business owners, trained by Roger Brooks, offering help to other business owners in non-competing markets. The next program will likely begin in the spring of 2010.

Perhaps the biggest help to small businesses is the development of the county's first comprehensive tourism website. This website will feature "Pick Your Season, Pick Your Passion" and a searchable database of where to eat, where to stay, and what to do. This website will be hosted on the same server as the State of NH official tourism website, visitnh.gov, and will be able to share information. The five Coos County Chambers of Commerce will also receive a website for their members that will interface with the Coos and State websites.

An important thing to remember is that "tourism is the backdoor to economic development." All businesses will benefit from the additional traffic in the area. If visitors to the area double, it stands to reason that businesses should see a double in profits, simply for being part of an area with increased visitation.

Tourism has been referred to several times as a trade show – if a business owner comes to the area and sees all that we have to offer, they may buy a house. Then they might buy a commercial property and move their company. It is all about having a good first-impression to drive the visitor to return. We hope that this program will benefit every resident of Northern New Hampshire.