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Tourism Testimony

The central question we seem to be debating today is, “will an increased tourism budget bring more visitors to Vermont?”

I feel strongly that the answer to this is yes, and I’d like to take a few minutes to explain my reasoning. First though, I think there’s another question we need to ask: “Does an increased budget allow us to reach more people?”

Categorically, the answer is yes.

With the rapid proliferation of digital media in general and social media in particular, it’s now possible to reach millions of people all over the world faster (and with less hassle) than ever before. Tools like Facebook, YouTube, Google search and more give us huge advantages in the types of messages we can craft, and the ways in which we choose who sees them.

At the same time, I think there’s a common misconception that this is (A) free, and (B) easy, especially when it comes to social media.

We can look at tools like Facebook and think that any organization can take a picture, type a few sentences and instantly generate responses and views that’ll lead to visitation. Unfortunately, this is increasingly not the case. As Facebook users continue to follow more organizations and get more friends, it becomes difficult to stand out and be noticed. To make matters worse, Facebook has also changed their algorithm to put more emphasis on individuals rather than Pages, meaning that every time you look at your feed you’re much more likely to see content from the former.

These changes have really impacted Business pages, and mean that even those with millions of Likes are getting a tiny percentage of the organic likes than they were five-six years ago.

Luckily, there is a way to get around this. By “Boosting content,” or placing money on a specific post or video, we’re able to reach a much larger number of active users than we could organically. A Boost can be anything from \$5 to several hundred dollars, depending on the value of the content and the likelihood of an audience relating and interacting with it.

The great thing about social media is that there’s a built-in feedback loop that lets us instantly assess how well a piece of content is doing: Unlike conventional media, people can respond directly (and publicly) to our content through Likes, Comments, Shares to let us know what they think about a specific post. This is gold for an organization such as ours, as our audience can let us know what they think of what we’re doing, and if they’re planning to visit us soon.

From careful analysis of our Interactions, we're able to see that a huge majority come directly from Boosted content, rather than reaching us organically. What's more, we can draw a strong correlation between social media outreach and on-site visitation, especially for our special events. Telling exactly how many visitors we're talking about is difficult, especially with repeat visitation, but I can say categorically that our current strategy makes a sizeable difference in both awareness and visitation.

Another larger issue I'd like to quickly touch on is that whatever medium we're talking about, good and effective content costs, both in money and time. High-res photography, well-edited video, blogging, paid search, social media, e-mail. These are all things that require a lot of expertise and experience to get great results and make a sizeable difference.

Looking ahead, almost everything I've just mentioned are things that the Department of Tourism is unable to excel in without a significant budget increase. We're amazingly fortunate to have such a phenomenally and dedicated team working for us, but that talent can only go so far without the resources to affect real change. While you can do some of the above on a shoestring budget, you're never going to have the sort of success that will make a true difference to the hundreds of small businesses around Vermont who most need the support of initiatives like those I've highlighted. Many are businesses with lots to offer, but without the means or expertise to run their own campaigns, and much of their continued success relies on the efforts of the Department of Tourism.

When all is said and done however, and even with all the enthusiasm in the world, a great budget, and an aggressive and multi-layered marketing plan, there's something missing: Faith in the Vermont brand, and a belief that what we find so special about our state will, and should, be noticed by others. If we truly believe in the value of Vermont's intrinsic beauty, culture, and place as one of the world's special places, as I think we all do, then I think we owe it to the state as a whole to provide the tools and resources necessary to promote it effectively.

If we do this, whole heartedly and with the support of all, then I firmly believe that the rest will fall into place.