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Sun & Ski Inn and Suites

When I was 8 I stood on a chair and washed dishes in the kitchen. I used to go around the hallways of the Inn ringing a bell to let people know it was dinner time. Among the other many jobs I had growing up in the hospitality business, I also remember licking a lot of envelopes. We had a mailing list with actual physical addresses, and we would send out paper brochures and lists of our seasonal rates. There were no computers, no internet, no google and no online travel agencies. Just a whole lot of envelopes and the oh so important 1-800 telephone number. Back then, that was marketing.

When I left for college in 1998, I had no intention of setting foot back in the state of Vermont as a resident and certainly not to take over the family business. But after living and working in the Netherlands for 9 years I found myself drawn back to the luster of our great State and the promise of an idealic lifestyle with my husband and children...and the family business was waiting.

When we took over the business in 2011, we knew very little about marketing. We quickly learned that after having a great experience to sell to our customers, marketing was a key factor in sustaining and growing our business. At that time the internet in relation to tourism and marketing was just beginning to hit its stride. Rudimentary websites with lots of words and the occasional photo could be found for most businesses. Every year we learned something new and added a digital marketing strategy to our playbook. Social media, email marketing, google ads you name it. We also worked on the quality of our content with blog writing, photography, video, more photography, more video.

Here is an example of one of our video projects that my husband and business partner developed for next year's winter season:

As we've refined our marketing strategy we've seen tangible returns with growth in occupancy and revenue. We've seen that if we invest in quality marketing we can grow our business. Growing our business means we can invest in our people

and sustain our product....and at the end of the year we might get to put something away for the future.

In addition to individual businesses own efforts to sustain and grow, the role of State level destination marketing organizations is also important. The tourism industry depends on the state of Vermont to promote the destination as a whole to potential visitors to show everything there is to experience here. Marketing the destination at the State level also gives access to visitor audiences that smaller localized businesses and organizations may not otherwise have. The Vermont Department of tourism and marketing has the ability to execute high funnel marketing campaigns with better economies of scale, wider partnerships and pooled resources. Ultimately local tourism businesses benefit when potential visitors work their way down the marketing funnel from inspiration to final purchase. The State benefits because more visitors means spending and spending means increased tax revenue. This is why governments across the globe invest significantly in their tourism marketing programs.

Tourism has an impact: tourism brings visitors to the state who spend. Tourism brings visitors who decide to move here. Successful tourism businesses are able to provide long term jobs at wages well above the current State minimum wage. Many tourism businesses are also entrenched in local communities. Local business leaders are stewards of development and protectors of our natural resources. They also partner and give back regularly to non-profits.

Tourism marketing has an impact: I see it in my own business but I can also see it at the State level. I see what VDTM can do with limited resources in my own website statistics. In December, Vermontvacation.com was my second highest referral site. But I also see how limited resources can be affecting their success. According to recent data from Expedia Vermont's room night growth from 2018 to 2019 was 1.7% compared to 5% for the rest of New England. With the Vermont State tourism budget decreasing by 6% over the last five years while the tourism budgets of Maine and New Hampshire are on the rise by the millions, this is not all that surprising.

When we moved back to Vermont 9 years ago, we did so because we felt there was an opportunity to run a good business and have a better quality of life than we had previously. I still believe in this promise, but there are many challenges. Destination marketing at the Vermont state level is absolutely critical to the health and viability of our tourism industry and our state's economy. Its time to invest in Vermont. Its time to deliver on our promise.