

## Establishing a Comprehensive Tourism Marketing Strategy for Hunterdon County as a Country Escape Destination

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### ABSTRACT

*This article is an industry commentary based on a case analysis of Hunterdon County's desire to grow tourism and evolve into a more sophisticated marketer in a highly competitive industry. Marketing challenges were identified, and strategic and tactical recommendations were advanced. The political challenge of moving stakeholders from a decentralized, uncoordinated, and underfunded approach to a more centralized strategy and structure is also discussed. This case analysis provides recommendations for Hunterdon County stakeholders and interested citizens. It also provides insights for other counties and regions that are in the early stages of creating a comprehensive tourism strategic plan and building an effective destination marketing organization (DMO) with the goal of increasing the tourism spend and related economic development. Decline in tourism dollars and lack of a coordinated, more centralized effort to formally position Hunterdon County as a viable tourism destination were the impetus for an investigation that focused on marketing, branding, social media, and multi-generational marketing. Infusing technology into a well-orchestrated marketing strategy was also considered pivotal to elevating awareness and appealing to previously untapped markets. Drawing more visitors to the region was identified as essential to both the immediate need for growth in tourism spend and the long-term economic health of the region.*

### Keywords

Tourism, destination marketing organization (DMO), branding, marketing strategy

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this commentary is to publish the results of a report ordered by the Hunterdon County Board of Commissioners (originally ordered by the same body under the former name "Hunterdon County Board of Chosen Freeholders") which analyzed and made recommendations on how to increase the tourism spend in Hunterdon County, New Jersey, by significantly improving the marketing strategy. The research question addressed by the commissioned report was what strategic marketing planning and actions are necessary to grow the tourism spend in Hunterdon County. The report makes such

recommendations for the Board of Commissioners. This commentary expands the audience to include all constituencies including other Hunterdon County stakeholders and interested citizens. It also provides insights for other counties and regions that are in the early stages of development relative to creating a comprehensive tourism strategic marketing plan and building an effective destination marketing organization (DMO) with the goal of increasing tourism spend and related economic development.

Hunterdon County is situated in the Skylands region of northwest New Jersey and flanked by the Delaware River and Pennsylvania. It is easily accessible by car from New York and Pennsylvania and perceived as a country escape destination either for day trippers, weekend trippers, or overnight guests. The Delaware River Towns and various main streets are major draws. However, although the region is abundant in gems that include rolling farms, a historic river, beautiful countryside, exceptional winery and dining experiences, sophisticated and tranquil lodgings, and an artisan culture, it is not considered a top-of-mind tourism region. The inability to establish a robust destination image for Hunterdon County has been attributed, in large part, to an informal, piecemeal approach to marketing the region which is not surprising because there are 26 separate municipalities and thus a highly decentralized structure for creating and implementing marketing strategy. These factors have resulted in the absence of a coordinated and impactful marketing plan, blurred brand perceptions, and a failure to grow a sustainable tourism model for Hunterdon County.

This article is drawn from the final phase of a three-part study ordered by the Hunterdon County Board of Commissioners and funded through a grant by the New Jersey Highlands Council. The three phases included an Economic Impact Study (Tyrrell, 2018), a Visitor Profile Study (Tyrrell, 2019), and Market Consultation (Barr, 2019). The Hunterdon County Chamber of Commerce, Hunterdon County Office of Economic Development, and Delaware River Towns Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Bureau also championed the effort. The analysis and recommendations in this paper were informed by the findings of the first two phases as well as extensive secondary research, anecdotal evidence from social media/customer reviews, on-site qualitative research that included interviews with a variety of business owners/operators from several Hunterdon County municipalities, and numerous exchanges with a representative from the Hunterdon County Economic Development Commission documented in the third phase (Barr, 2019). Moreover, the state of the travel and tourism industry in terms of trends and technological advancements was gleaned from both the academic literature and popular press and influenced the recommendations. It is noteworthy to mention the analysis and resulting recommendations were undertaken pre-pandemic. However, the challenges posed to the travel and tourism industry by the pandemic make it even more important for regional tourism destinations such as Hunterdon County to begin the process of creating and implementing a coordinated county-wide marketing strategy. This article is an industry commentary based on a case analysis of one county's need to grow tourism and evolve into a more sophisticated marketer in a highly competitive market.

The overall recommendation resulting from the case analysis was that a four-pronged marketing strategy was needed to establish Hunterdon County as a viable country escape destination. Marketing challenges were identified, and strategic and tactical recommendations were advanced.

## **INDUSTRY CONTEXT**

Extensive academic and popular press research was conducted to gain insight into the shifts and trends in the travel and tourism industry. This provided invaluable insight for both developing the SWOT analysis and the recommendations for Hunterdon County.

### **Paradigm Shift in Travel and Tourism**

Effective destination marketing strategies and tactics are endemic to counties and regions that draw high levels of tourism spend such as the Berkshires in Massachusetts and Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Destination

marketing has been described as “a continuous, sequential process through which a DMO plans, researches, implements, controls and evaluates programs aimed at satisfying tourists’ needs and wants as well as the destination’s and DMO’s visions, goals and objectives” (Sotiriadis, 2021, p. 42). A managerial, systematic approach to marketing a tourism destination through the organizational structure of a DMO is the foundation for attaining desired outcomes beneficial to all stakeholders, with the major goals being attracting tourists and increasing the spend. Moreover, a holistic, multi-organization view of marketing is necessary to maximize outcomes for all affected parties, including individual businesses, visitors, local governments, partner organizations, and county residents. It has also been acknowledged that attaining a balance among sometimes conflicting stakeholder perceptions and interests to minimize negative impacts is necessary (Sotiriadis, 2021). Coordinating strategy in regional structures is challenging given the large number of stakeholders and requires significant knowledge, political skill, and leadership. A well-functioning DMO facilitates this more centralized and coordinated strategic approach, and the creation of an effective regional DMO is a process that requires years, if not decades, of development.

The fundamental challenge faced by destinations like Hunterdon County is that the lack of a centralized DMO prevents the region from funding and implementing a sophisticated, state-of-the-art marketing strategy to grow. Essentially, an effective regional DMO creates a powerful umbrella brand, which individual businesses and tourist attractions can then tie into with their marketing plans. One symptom of that lack of sophistication and marketing knowledge needed to revitalize and establish a formal, consistent umbrella brand image is the dated or complete disregard for using digital and social media technology to promote the county, capture data, and provide streamlined user experiences. Such user experiences are now expected by most market segments as they experience state-of-the-art technology in other contexts and make comparisons. The concept of “smart tourism” bridges the gulf between the physical and digital worlds through smartphone, cloud computing, and other technological advancements (Gajdošík, 2020) and attracts initial and return visitors and brand loyalty. Other components of the paradigm shift in travel and tourism include thoughtful alignment with visitors’ values and expectations (e.g., sustainability/social movements like farm-to-table, authentic local experiences), seamless integration of technology for disseminating information to tourists and facilitating reservations, establishing a comprehensive travel partner network, and cultivating communities through social media and local experts/influencers (Mariani et al., 2014).

Identifying and marketing to relevant market segments for a given region is critical to attracting tourists and increasing the spend. Tourism destinations strive to design experiential offerings to establish a competitive advantage (Rather, 2020) within attractive market segments. For example, foodie-related events such as cooking classes and winemaking are considered highly desirable attractions because they immerse visitors in destinations and are tied directly to the region. A signature example is the tourism success of the Napa Valley of California, which is based on wine tasting, touring wineries, and the beauty of the region. Moreover, “Food will continue to be the way to visitors’ hearts—and Instagram feeds—with even more travelers hungry for culture and adventure planning trips around signature culinary offerings” (Miele, 2019, para. 3). Other effective tactics include promoting a destination based on a unique historic event (e.g., the Civil War Battle of Gettysburg reenactment) or pop culture (e.g., the Coachella music festival in California). Additionally, highly personalized interactions achieved through a mobile app, for example, deliver a much more valued experience while simultaneously increasing overall spend. “Travelers have the knowledge and power to go it alone—finding their way around a destination and spontaneously booking tours, restaurant reservations, attraction tickets or just about anything else direct from their smartphones” (Miele, 2019, para. 10). Hilton Honors’ app, for instance, offers personalized features like a Fun Finder that sends geo-alerts about special offers and event invitations when guests are within a given proximity to certain amenities like a spa. Another notable trend includes tech-savvy solutions like augmented reality apps for offerings like DIY walking tours (Miele, 2019).

## **DMO Best Practices and Trends**

The foundation of a strong DMO brand is an ability to foster deep community roots at the outset of the planning process, which manifests itself in a commitment to an appropriate level of centralized planning and coordination and the required funding. Attaining this commitment is a key internal challenge for the DMO. Stakeholders especially and the local community generally need to be supportive of the DMO model and the resulting marketing strategy and brand creation. The personification and vitality of the destination brand and the central role of the DMO must be maintained as political appointments and business ownership/composition shift. "... community-based brands have to be built following a highly consultative and transparent process—along with broad buy-in and a shared sense of ownership" (Baker, 2017, para. 2). The DMO and its supporters need strong leadership and political skills to influence a large and diverse group of stakeholders and build buy-in. Internal stakeholders like employees, company owners, community residents, and volunteers serve as key brand ambassadors in spreading goodwill about destinations via word of mouth. Savvy DMOs and tourism boards recognize their various roles in creating value for visitors and reinforcing the brand promise (Miller, 2018) and make it easy for these stakeholders to use the regional umbrella brand to market their own destination by providing marketing support.

The external branding process is equally as important and combines all tangible and intangible benefits to establish a differential advantage in the competitive space. Authenticity, credibility, and distinctiveness are hallmarks of iconic and sustainable DMO brand platforms. One significant change in destination marketing is the morphing of the various dimensions of a region's personality into sustainable brand communities with an experiential flavor. Finger Lakes, New York ([FingerLakes.org](http://FingerLakes.org)), and Richmond, Virginia ([VisitRichmondVA.com](http://VisitRichmondVA.com)), are two excellent examples of this phenomenon. Social influencers are often an instrumental component, and storytelling is a popular tactic. Influencers can be categorized as macro or micro. The former has the power to elevate awareness swiftly on an aggregate albeit impersonal level through sites like Instagram. Comparatively, the latter has small- to mid-sized social media followings but tends to carve out a niche, enabling them to connect with followers in a much more intimate manner. Micro-influencers can often emerge organically from visits to travel destinations, and the DMO would need to query business owners and local government officials/employees to uncover them. Monitoring social media reviews that receive a lot of likes or shares would also be beneficial insofar as the DMO may approach potential micro-influencers and offer incentives to continue to visit and share experiences online. Travel bloggers who may use different platforms and strategies than influencers should also be researched and utilized. For instance, bloggers often use video marketing to heighten overall engagement, build a brand that resonates, increases sharing, and establishes trust (Mulindi, 2017). However, "with influencer marketing, likes, clicks, engagement and comments mean nothing if it's not generating revenue" (Ward, 2017, para. 13). So data and technology must be used to assess audience response to branded content posts to assess impact and ultimately tourist spend.

Technology has permeated all aspects of the travel and tourism industry. DMOs that do not effectively infuse digital elements are at a tremendous disadvantage. Traditional promotional methods include advertising, signage, and collateral materials. In recent years, digital touchpoints like proprietary websites, third-party sites like TripAdvisor, customized apps, social media, email blasts, blogs, and customer reviews have become invaluable. Moreover, digital and traditional content should uniformly reflect a destination's aesthetics and character and make it compelling and memorable to prospective visitors. "It's imperative that you understand your customers' mindset and properly align their experiences and expectations into one seamless moment ... needs to flow into every customer experience that you provide, online and offline" (Fuggle, 2016, para. 15).

The DMO website, in particular, is crucial to the customer journey and often the first touchpoint. Consumers have high expectations of a website. It must be easy to navigate, intuitive and display

information clearly, inspire and, above all, be helpful (Archer, 2018). First impressions of a website are formed in .05 seconds, so the above-the-fold content is crucial. A DMO website should also be regularly updated and mobile friendly. In fact, mobile bookings in travel grew 1,700 percent between 2011 and 2015 (Archer, 2018) and 61 percent of travelers in the U.S. booked and paid for travel through their smartphone in 2018 (Stats, 2018). Therefore, a cohesive digital presence and collaborative network of travel partners/suppliers who can cross-sell (e.g., lodging with excursions) is essential for merging a region's assets and maximizing return on investment. And for many travelers, a priority upon arrival to the destination is determining the hashtag set by the tourism board to get their images shared. "Set the hashtag for your destination, market it, monitor it, and share the really high-quality visuals that are selling your destination at no cost to you" (Fuggle, 2016, para. 12).

## **Competition**

Bucks County, Pennsylvania ([VisitBucksCounty.com](http://VisitBucksCounty.com)), and the Hudson Valley, New York ([TravelHudsonValley.com](http://TravelHudsonValley.com)), were identified as direct competitors to Hunterdon County. Both country escape destinations have long-standing reputations, well-entrenched brand propositions, and honed marketing strategies. In particular, their respective well-established DMOs recognize the significance of incorporating visuals into all aspects of promotion, especially digital.

The opening page on the Bucks County website is ripe with visuals but borders on being somewhat overwhelming for the visitor. More white space is necessary to ease the process of absorbing and balancing the visual elements. Interestingly, the site has a prominent "From the Locals" link that brings the user to a page that includes a list of authors who live and work in the area and share their respective stories. This authentic "insider" glimpse personalizes the experience for prospective visitors. Also, the "Visit Bucks County" slogan is carried through on collateral materials and social media sites, and visual elements and themes are intertwined. The [VisitBucksCounty Facebook](#) page is also inviting and effectively uses a cover video with aerial photography.

The Hudson Valley site adeptly uses sensory cues; specifically, the white text overlays on the images trigger the five senses. Sensory perception is a powerful mechanism for attracting prospects and central to the perception-reality philosophy that defines the influence of branding. In fact, the phenomenon is captured in a seminal advertising monograph that "we taste the image, drink the label ..." (Twitchell, 2000, p. 28) when referring to classic campaigns like Absolut and Marlboro. Moreover, Hudson Valley's most well-known natural asset is showcased consistently on the website. "Follow the river" prefaces most of the copy. Some of the sensory appeal image overlays include "Listen to the quiet" and "Hear and watch live performances," and the [Hudson Valley Facebook](#) page is laden with beautiful visuals.

Secondary competitors include the Berkshires, Massachusetts ([1Berkshire.com](http://1Berkshire.com)), Lancaster, Pennsylvania ([DiscoverLancaster.com](http://DiscoverLancaster.com)), and Southern Shore, New Jersey ([NJSouthernShore.com](http://NJSouthernShore.com)).

## **DISCUSSION**

The information in the prior section of this commentary was extracted from extensive secondary research, qualitative interviews, and anecdotal evidence gleaned partially from phases one and two (Tyrrell, 2018; Tyrrell, 2019) and heavily from phase three (Barr, 2019) of the Hunterdon County project. The material was gathered and compiled into a detailed SWOT analysis, highlighted in the next section, providing the foundation for identifying marketing challenges, branding opportunities, and other strategic recommendations for Hunterdon County. A SWOT analysis is "a comparison of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that helps executives formulate strategy" (Bateman et al., 2023, p. 117). It is primarily an analytic framework that uses a variety of relevant data and research methodologies to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, as opposed to requiring specific types of data and analysis (e.g., LISREL structural equations). It is generally considered a qualitative research

methodology. Further, SWOT analysis is a well-established strategic planning tool widely used by business practitioners and taught in graduate and undergraduate business administration courses in strategy and management (Chernev, 2019).

### **SWOT Analysis**

The primary strengths that emerged from the study were unwavering support of the attractiveness of Hunterdon County as a tourism destination by two county chambers of commerce (Hunterdon County Chamber of Commerce and the Delaware River Towns Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Bureau), two county government organizations (the Hunterdon County Board of Commissioners and the Hunterdon County Office of Economic Development), a very strong sense of community pride generally, and hospitality and restaurateurs' focus on delivering exceptional customer experiences across the region; highly satisfied customers who often return to the region; a perception among stakeholders that Hunterdon County is a bucolic and breathtaking setting; easy access by car from New York and Pennsylvania; a plethora of brand assets; and many storytelling opportunities that reinforce a highly attractive narrative.

The primary weakness was the complete absence of a distinctive umbrella brand identity for Hunterdon County; thus it was not perceived as a comprehensive, legitimate tourism destination. The lack of brand identity results in low awareness levels, which greatly impedes attracting tourists. Additionally, there was not a dedicated DMO for travel and tourism for the entire region, which is the major reason for the lack of a brand identity. In fact, there are four county organizations that address to varying degrees improving travel and tourism spending but do not coordinate and have not developed a strategic marketing plan or, more importantly, a strategic planning structure and process. Other weaknesses included an inadequate amount of and expense for lodging; the lack of a high-tech, high-touch tourist experience; independent marketing and branding programs for towns and businesses instead of a coordinated and cohesive county-wide marketing strategy; and the lack of marketing data necessary to build an impactful, more centralized strategy.

Opportunities included steady national and state growth in tourism for the last several years (pre-pandemic); historic roots, majestic beauty, and small-town charm; abundant brand assets; well-known towns that are major draws to the region; potential partnership with Airbnb; the ability to appeal to younger generations of travelers by infusing technology and desired amenities; close proximity to very large population centers, and Hunterdon County being poised to respond to the "work, play, life balance" travel trend because of its central location in a highly populated region.

The primary threat continues to be competition; specifically, Bucks County and the Hudson Valley. Other threats were identified as resistance by some internal stakeholders to adopt an integrated tourism brand program; local hotel owners' reluctance to embrace Airbnb as a solution to an inadequate supply of rooms; a high second-home population who are opposed to increasing tourism; and an inability to attract younger demographics to live and work in the region.

### **Marketing Challenges**

Any strategy developed by Hunterdon County must address these four critical marketing challenges.

1. *Lack of an umbrella brand image/identity.* Brands deliver value to customers through significant points of difference. Associations are then created which shape perceptions and, ultimately, experiences. Although Hunterdon County is abundant in gems that include rolling farms, a historic river, beautiful countryside, exceptional winery and dining experiences, sophisticated and tranquil lodging, and an artisan culture, it is not a top-of-mind tourism destination. An umbrella brand strategy would position it as such and should minimally include a logo, slogan, specific colors, design attributes, text, and photos. Moreover, an integrated marketing communications approach

should be used with simplicity, clarity, and consistency as priorities. Ultimately, Hunterdon County needs an appropriately centralized and integrated marketing strategy created through the leadership of a single county-wide DMO (discussed in marketing challenge 4).

2. *Dedicated website and entry portal.* Local government organizations and chambers are crucial to promoting tourism and are vested in the vitality of all businesses in the various towns in Hunterdon County, and effectively coordinating their marketing efforts is of critical importance. In fact, the Hunterdon County Board of Chosen Freeholders is the first link that appears when conducting a search for the region and typing in the words “Hunterdon County.” Similarly, those canvassing the web for the destination are directed to the Hunterdon County Chamber of Commerce via the New Jersey DMOs’ page. Although informational, visitors engaged in the search effort are interested in a website devoted to county-wide tourism offerings. It is often the first touchpoint in the user search experience which should feed into others, such as securing lodging, making dining reservations, purchasing tickets for events, and other related services. A dedicated website managed by a separate DMO is essential to establishing a brand image/identity for the destination that will be immediately recognizable across all forms of communication. A centralized website is critical to creating an effective umbrella brand and leveraging the strengths of the various stakeholders. An effective and centralized website should clearly position Hunterdon County as a year-round tourism destination with multiple offerings for both prospective and returning visitors. This website has to be the storefront representing the Hunterdon County tourism marketing strategy.
3. *Carving out a niche for Hunterdon County in a competitive tourism market.* Regionally, primary country escape competitors Bucks County and Hudson County have achieved high awareness levels through stellar and consistent marketing due to more sophisticated DMOs. Other Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York towns are also threats for tourism dollars. A strong brand presence on travel/dining and crowdsourced review sites like Yelp and TripAdvisor is essential. Moreover, targeted social media marketing and messaging, remarkable advertising, and elegant collateral materials will reinforce the overall strategy and attract desirable market segments.
4. *Buy-in of towns/individual businesses and internal branding.* For a holistic marketing strategy to succeed, all internal stakeholders should be wedded to the initiative and willing to subsume many current activities into a consolidated brand for the country escape resort region. Building brand equity is a long-term process that requires substantial commitment as well as the pooling of talent and resources. Hunterdon County needs an appropriately centralized and integrated marketing strategy created through the leadership of a single county-wide DMO. Such a strategy would allow for complementary stakeholder marketing plans and leverage the resources of county-wide, town-based, and one-location tourist destinations and services. The DMO would provide the structure, leadership, appropriate resources, and marketing support. The political concept of federalism may be an effective approach to structuring the roles, tasks, and duties and the issue of centralization versus decentralization of decision making by county-wide, town/municipal, or one-location organizations. Creation of such a structure is a political process that will require considerable leadership (especially from county-wide government and chambers of commerce) and compromise among all stakeholders to leverage their strengths. Given that the Hunterdon County Board of Commissioners ordered the three-phase project, they are the obvious choice to provide the leadership necessary to create and implement a viable, single DMO. Whatever the structure and process used, the DMO must prioritize the effective and efficient creation and coordination of a marketing strategy that results in an impactful umbrella brand and other tactics that increase tourist visits and spend.

## **Key Components of the Marketing Strategy**

The analysis revealed that brand assets, brand storytelling, tourism themes/clusters, target marketing, and Airbnb are key considerations in effectively identifying and selecting target markets. Implementing an appropriate marketing analytics process provides the data for Hunterdon County to create and manage an effective marketing strategy. These key considerations are discussed in this section.

### ***Brand Assets***

Brand assets are versatile and plentiful in Hunterdon County. Key attractions include Mad Lavender Farm, Beneduce Vineyards, and the Red Mill Museum Village. However, when searching for the top ten things to do in Hunterdon County on Yelp, only two of the top five attractions listed were actually located in Hunterdon County (Mad Lavender Farm in Milford and Beneduce Vineyards in Pittstown). The other three were actually in adjacent towns in Pennsylvania; namely, Crayola Experience (Easton), Magic Gardens (Philadelphia), and Shady Brook Farm (Yardley). This is evidence of the lack of a coordinated, formal, overarching marketing effort for the county that can be easily remedied through a consolidated branding campaign reinforced through digital, social, and traditional media, and collateral programs.

The following brand assets may be classified as spectacular due to their inimitability, inclusion as major Hunterdon County attractions on tourism sites, and/or validation by credible industry ranking sources (Tyrell, 2018).

- Clinton Red Mill Museum Village: listed as one of the top 10 most photographed sites in the country
- Ironbound Hard Cider: sourcing, products and the story surrounding the agritourism business model
- The Stockton Market: only artisanal market of its kind in Hunterdon County
- Delaware River Towns (Milford, Lambertville, Frenchtown, Stockton)
- The Woolverton Inn: ranked among the top 10 B&Bs in the country
- Covered bridge in Delaware Township: only remaining one in New Jersey
- Steam engine excursion train between Lambertville and Flemington
- Teaberry's Victorian tea house
- Pony Pratt Truss Bridge: listed on the National Register of Historic Places
- South Branch of the Raritan River: rated one of the "ten best trout streams" in America

Other noteworthy offerings and happenings (Tyrell, 2018):

- Vineyards (Beneduce, Grape Finale, Unionville, Old York, Mount Salem): potential wine tour opportunities
- Halloween festivities in Lambertville, Bloomsbury and Clinton as well as big, haunted hayrides at Shaefer Farms and the Red Mill
- Main street towns (Clinton, Flemington, Milford, Stockton, Lambertville, High Bridge, Frenchtown)
- A plethora of farm-to-table restaurants (aligned with the pervasive agritourism theme)
- Tubing down the Delaware River
- Frenchtown Bastille Day
- Clinton's Dickens Days
- HC Arboretum
- Edelweiss Farm
- Shad and Winter Festivals in Lambertville
- Fourth of July in Lebanon Borough



- Numerous farmers' markets
- Ship Inn: New Jersey's first licensed brewpub since Prohibition
- Festival of Ballooning at Solberg-Hunterdon Airport every July
- Numerous festivals throughout the year

### ***Brand Storytelling***

Brand storytelling is a potentially powerful mechanism for bringing the Hunterdon County brand to life in a way that is simple, moving, and authentic. Based on the case study research conducted for this commentary, there are many stories surrounding Hunterdon County history, community, culture, food and drink, and agritourism that would not only resonate with visitors but create lasting word-of-mouth and digital impressions. Additionally, it is recommended that sub-stories be created to appeal to a wide variety of market segments. Some prospective stories include:

- The Red Mill Museum renaissance (and award-winning artists)
- The artisan Stockton Market
- The distinctive Ironbound agritourism model
- The Milford Alive small-town pride
- The ArtYard community-minded project
- Revolutionary War sites

### ***Potential Tourism Themes/Clusters***

As discussed in prior sections of this commentary, a coordinated and centralized umbrella brand strategy is needed to establish a distinct identity and image for the area and position it as a top-of-mind regional tourism destination. Opportunities for consolidated brand offerings that will connect to the master brand abound. Several potential brand themes emerged from the research and, ideally, no more than five or six should be touted in the marketing strategy. The sweet spots chosen will ultimately shape the brand and define the tourism destination. Key considerations should be natural resources and attractions/events intrinsic to the area, competitors' brand portfolios, and visitor preferences. It is recommended that select offerings in the 26 municipalities be clustered to craft brand offerings that will appeal to the various generational and/or life stage groups and other market segments that may visit the region. Suggestions include:

- Arts and culture
- Agritourism
- Great outdoors
- Scenic and historic
- Artisan
- Rural charm
- Botanical garden
- Rustic and vintage
- Tradition (Franklin Township – Quakers)
- Food and drink
- Hiking and biking

The selection of five or six of these options should afford ample opportunities for theme-based destination packages (e.g., food, wine, history, culture, artisan, etc.), that could be publicized as tourism clusters for the various market segments. Thirty-second virtual tour videos for each should also be included in all forms of digital media (especially Facebook and Instagram) to entice prospects. Other possibilities include

a scenic biking tour (accompanied by an app that includes a link for Pete's Bike & Fitness Shoppe) and a "restaurant night" promotion in towns like Clinton, Lambertville, and Frenchtown where food establishments are in close walking proximity. Also, the research conducted in phase three (Barr, 2019) indicated there are several annual events revolving around seasons (e.g., apple picking and cider at Melick's Town Farm in Oldwick) and holidays (e.g., the popular Santa's train sponsored by Flemington), so a "10 things to do in Hunterdon County" or a monthly online calendar of events should be considered. In fact, as an avenue to elevating awareness about the destination and cementing it as top-of-mind, two regional events should be organized each year. Possibilities include an Oktoberfest (unlike any other in the tri-state) and either a Mayfest or "Welcome to Summer" celebration every June.

It is expected that visitors will gravitate toward the tourism clusters and segments will evolve organically. It is the role of the DMO to monitor patronage activity using metrics and analytics so segments can be classified and messaging can be tailored accordingly. For instance, wineries would not be preferred by families with young children. Understanding life stage marketing and tracking segments as they transition generationally due to age, family status, and major life events is also pivotal to a tourism model that is sustainable. Travel preferences and habits change during the various life stages, and DMOs must monitor and anticipate to capitalize on such shifts.

Multi-generational marketing was the top travel trend in 2018 insofar as "... families continue to travel, in search of experiences that create closer bonds and lasting memories" (Kickham, 2018, para. 1). Members of Generation Z (7-22 years of age) are major influencers in multi-generational travel decisions and seek authentic, unique experiences like hot-air ballooning (Kickham, 2018).

In addition to life stage and generation, other viable segmentation criteria for travelers are usage patterns (frequency of visit, length of visit) and destination purpose. Geographic location is also a factor and is likely a segmenting variable. For example, there are different demographics, motivations, and interests for day trippers, weekend trippers, and overnight visitors. Hence, packages and programs should be developed accordingly.

Research findings indicate that Hunterdon County appeals to a multitude of market segments who visit for different reasons and have varied spending patterns and preferences. The four primary generations identified were Boomers, Millennials, Generation Z, and the Silent Generation. Overlaying life stage impacts length of stay and spend. Family travel is also popular, and most visitors have party sizes ranging from three to six (Tyrrell, 2019).

On-site interviews with business owners (Barr, 2019) indicated that Millennials were an untapped market possibly because they rely so heavily on technology to research and commit to a destination, and some individual Hunterdon County businesses have been slow to embrace digital and social media marketing. Millennials often travel with groups of friends, and their lodging preference tends to be great outdoors excursions booked through Airbnb. They also gravitate toward unique experiences, and given the vast number of options in the region, it is realistic that they would return regularly provided they are educated through promotional methods. Another valuable segment is the affluent, mature market because they have both the time and money for upscale dining, shopping sprees, winery excursions, and extended stays.

Establishing an overarching tourism brand that will heighten awareness for Hunterdon County should be the priority. Then separate packages and programs can be developed to attract the various market segments. Given the overlapping nature of some of the groups, Hunterdon County should strive to establish loyalty to the destination at an early life stage. Also, metrics and analytics should be used to develop target market profiles, track usage habits, and predict behavior so tailored packages and programs can be developed.

Moreover, once Hunterdon County establishes a distinctive and compelling brand identity in the regional tourism space, it may be beneficial to consider a co-branding partnership with Bucks County given the close proximity of the DMO, historical coupling of New Hope and Lambertville, and roots in the Delaware River Towns. The spillover effect of two upscale brands could potentially expand the visitor base as well as repeat business for both regions.

### ***Airbnb Partnership***

Airbnb is another significant market segment opportunity. Airbnb has significantly disrupted the lodging industry, experiencing 100 percent year-over-year growth since its inception in 2008 in ten key hotel markets in the U.S. (Mody & Gomez, 2018). The travel platform generated \$93 million in profit in 2017 with nearly 660,000 listings (Airbnb, 2021) and had nearly 150 million users as of 2018 (Curry, 2021). The threat has been palpable with hotels losing about \$450 million in direct revenues annually to Airbnb (Mody & Gomez, 2018), and it has encroached on travel destinations large and small both nationally and globally.

Given the fact that for Hunterdon County, lodging, availability, room capacity, and premium prices create a situation where the county cannot adequately accommodate enough extended overnight stays to meet growth targets, it would be logical to partner with Airbnb hosts (preferably super hosts) who live in the region. This will also entice younger markets to the region because Airbnb is typically 6-17 percent less expensive than a regional hotel's average daily rate (Mody & Gomez, 2018). Millennials prefer Airbnb stays to traditional lodging options, so they are a potentially lucrative market segment. Luring more Millennials would also infuse a healthy dose of brand energy into the area.

Although it is anticipated that the long-term benefits of establishing an Airbnb partnership may not be entirely understood by some stakeholders like existing Hunterdon County lodging owners, it is highly likely that overall tourism traffic and, ultimately, spend to the region would increase. The move would also result in greater social media exposure and buzz, and visitors would experience a greater authenticity through the lens of local hosts. A less direct but significant benefit is the likely halo effect of the Airbnb platform in elevating awareness of Hunterdon County.

### ***Analytics and Market Research***

Critical to creating and managing an effective marketing strategy, Hunterdon County must implement a comprehensive and timely marketing research and analytics process. This is especially important given the importance of digital and social media marketing. Using the valid measures that produce data in a systematic manner will allow Hunterdon County to better understand visitors, target the most productive market segments, especially the appropriate geographic areas, and create destination packages that will attract new visitors and increase frequency and length of stays. Also, a two- or three-question survey (that rotates different questions) can be sent immediately following a visit through email or an app to gain additional insights about how to improve the customer experience. This should become a standard practice. Eventually, algorithms can be developed to prompt return visits and alert users about upcoming events of interest.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Summary of Recommendations for Marketing Strategy**

Several recommendations were made throughout this report.

1. An umbrella brand strategy is necessary to project a solid image, establish a uniform identity and position Hunterdon County as a top-of-mind destination in the tourism region.

2. A dedicated DMO is essential to establishing and managing a uniform brand image and all related activities.
3. A high-tech, high-touch experience is needed to both improve the customer experience and elevate the region's status as a viable competitor in the country escape destination space.
4. A stellar social media marketing program, remarkable advertising, and elegant collateral materials will reinforce the branding effort.
5. All internal stakeholders must be wedded to the comprehensive branding initiative for it to succeed. Ideally, all individual marketing activities should be subsumed under the Hunterdon County brand. This will require political leadership, especially by county-wide agencies. The Hunterdon County Board of Commissioners is the obvious candidate to lead this effort to develop a unified marketing strategy resulting in a comprehensive brand. The structure to achieve this is a dedicated DMO, and the commissioners should also champion its creation.
6. An adequate sustainable revenue source(s) should be established to fund the activities of the DMO. Possibilities include an occupancy tax, a more generalized tourism tax, and contributions from the two chambers and county government entities listed above. Other revenue models effectively used by similar DMOs should be explored.
7. The DMO should use a hybrid approach relative to centralized versus decentralized marketing efforts, making it attractive and easy for county businesses and stakeholders to coordinate with the county-wide tourism marketing strategy. This will require a marketing strategic plan component to solicit the support and participation of county businesses and other tourism stakeholders.
8. Hunterdon County has an abundance of exclusive brand assets that have resulted in delighted customers who return regularly to the region. Heightened awareness levels achieved through the branding effort will inevitably build traffic and increase spend.
9. The spectacular brand assets should be leveraged extensively because they are points of difference that cannot be replicated by competitors.
10. Brand storytelling opportunities are intrinsic to the region and must be shared through social media and other promotion mechanisms. Customer testimonials and social influencers are important factors, and opportunities for both need to be identified and leveraged.
11. Potential brand themes include arts and culture, agritourism, great outdoors, scenic and historic, artisan, rural charm, rustic and vintage, and hiking and biking. The selection of five or six of these options should afford ample opportunities for theme-related destination packages. It is recommended that thirty-second virtual tour videos for each be included in all forms of digital media, ideally supported by an app.
12. Annual and seasonal events should be heavily promoted.
13. Two regional events should be organized each year to draw large crowds to the region. Possibilities include an Oktoberfest and a "Welcome to Summer" celebration.
14. Market segments can be classified along several dimensions including life stage, generation, usage (frequency of visit, length of visit), and destination purpose. Geographic location is also a factor.

Metrics and analytics should be used to develop target market profiles, track usage habits, and predict behavior so tailored packages and programs can be developed.

15. Given the fact that lodging availability, room capacity, and a premium-pricing structure cannot adequately accommodate substantial and extended overnight stays to Hunterdon County, a partnership with Airbnb hosts in the region should be contemplated and developed.

Hunterdon County is abundant in gems that include rolling farms, a historic river, beautiful countryside, exceptional winery and dining experiences, sophisticated and tranquil lodgings, and an artisan culture. However, awareness of the destination's many offerings is low. The lack of an effective DMO structure and comprehensive marketing strategy are serious weaknesses. A broad marketing strategy must include an umbrella brand for the county that will establish an image/identity, elevate awareness, and position the region as a viable country escape destination. A centralized DMO structure should be established, which will require political leadership. This DMO should then spearhead and structure the design and implementation of a sophisticated marketing strategy including the critically important digital and social media components. Eventually, the services of an app developer and analytics expert should be secured. The Hunterdon County Board of Commissioners should lead the effort, working closely with the Hunterdon County Chamber of Commerce, Hunterdon County Office of Economic Development, and the Delaware River Towns Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Bureau, to create a unified DMO. The primary goal of the DMO should be to craft and implement a coordinated marketing strategy resulting in an impactful Hunterdon County tourism brand that results in an increase in tourism spend. Additionally, an adequate sustainable revenue source(s) should be established to fund the activities of the DMO. Possibilities include an occupancy tax, a more generalized tourism tax, and contributions from the two chambers and county government entities listed above. Other revenue models effectively used by similar DMOs should be explored. The DMO should use a hybrid approach relative to centralized versus decentralized marketing efforts, making it attractive and easy for county businesses and stakeholders to coordinate with the county-wide tourism marketing strategy. Without buy-in to the coordinated marketing strategy and DMO model from stakeholders, the recommendations of this report will not be effective.

Implementation by Hunterdon County of the recommendations was delayed due to the global pandemic. However, in 2021 some of the recommended strategies were executed. Two new websites, [Hunterdon County 579 Trail](#) and [Hunterdon Main Streets](#), were launched. Both sites attract visitors through bold, crisp, oversized visuals, and use web designs that make it easy for viewers to navigate. There are also links to several social media sites (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook), which is essential for digital cross-pollination and increasing virality. Hunterdon County has taken important initial steps in establishing its tourism region as a viable competitor among other country escape destinations. It remains to be seen if they can establish a centralized DMO structure and create and execute a sophisticated marketing strategy capable of attracting tourists and increasing spend to the region.

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