

2012/13 STRATEGIC PLAN

Explore Minnesota Tourism's mission is to promote and facilitate travel to and within the state of Minnesota. Tourism in the state is an \$11.9 billion industry, supporting almost 240,000 jobs. The economic impact of travel and tourism are felt in communities in every part of the state. Explore Minnesota Tourism, the state's tourism promotion office, works closely with tourism businesses and tourism promotion organizations across the state to attract travelers to Minnesota communities. This strategic plan outlines the programs and tactics Explore Minnesota Tourism will carry out in 2013 to achieve its mission.

Key Indicators of how well the tourism industry is doing include:

- Gross sales/leisure & hospitality: \$11.9 billion
- Leisure & hospitality employment: 240,000 jobs, \$4.1 billion in wages
- Tax revenues generated by leisure & hospitality: \$769 million in state sales tax, 17% of all state sales tax revenues

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STRUCTURE AND BUDGET

To fulfill its mission and achieve its strategic objectives, Explore Minnesota Tourism is organized into three areas: Marketing and Communications, Industry Relations and Travel Information Centers, and Operations and Technology.

Marketing and Research: Advertising and promotions directed to potential travelers include television and radio, electronic marketing, partnerships and special promotions. Marketing partnerships extend the reach of Explore Minnesota advertising. The primary markets in the U.S. are in the north central region. International markets include Canada, Mexico, Japan, China, United Kingdom, Germany, and Scandinavia. This unit also markets Minnesota to group tour operators and has a packaged travel program. Research conducted in-house or provided by other sources guides the development of marketing programs.

Media relations, publications and electronic media, including e-newsletters and the state tourism website, are all key to Explore Minnesota Tourism marketing. Media relations programs generate positive media coverage of Minnesota travel opportunities and of the state's tourism industry. A large photo library provides the media with visual images of the state. A series of publications, many developed through publishing partnerships, promotes Minnesota destinations and activities. This unit is also responsible for editorial content on www.exploreminnesota.com.

Industry Relations and Travel Information Centers: This program area is responsible for facilitating two-way communication between Explore Minnesota Tourism and the state's tourism industry. Regional staff located in Brainerd, Duluth, Mankato, Thief River Falls and St. Paul provides marketing assistance to communities and regional tourism associations. The staff facilitates inter-

agency partnerships, develops educational programs, coordinates the Governor's fishing and hunting opener events and monitors public policy issues that may affect tourism in Minnesota. Grants are awarded to nonprofit tourism organizations to maximize state and local marketing resources. This unit also manages advertising sales for the website and the *Travel Guide* publication. The Travel Information Centers staff provides personalized travel planning assistance to travelers on the road at ten travel information centers located at major entry points around the state, promote Minnesota through social media, and assist with database projects and consumer shows.

Operations and Technology Services: Staff of this unit maintains the website and the extensive database of accommodations, attractions, and events information that is the foundation of the site and of customized travel planning information. Travel counselors in the contact center provide personalized travel planning assistance to prospective travelers by phone, mail and e-mail. The distribution center fulfills requests for travel information and handles shipping and receiving of travel publications. This unit is also responsible for administrative, financial and personnel functions of the office.

Budget: The budget for the FY14-15 biennium is \$13.9 million per year, a significant increase from the previous \$8.4 million budget, which will allow for expanded marketing. In addition, partnerships with the private sector generate cash and in-kind support for Explore Minnesota Tourism programs; this "match" support typically has a value of more than \$5 million. The agency employs 64 full and part-time staff.

SITUATION OVERVIEW

After three years of moderate growth in travel, key metrics for Minnesota's lodging industry have finally surpassed pre-recession levels. As of April 2013, occupancy and revenue at Minnesota lodging businesses have recovered to levels of five years ago.

With growing consumer confidence and a pent-up desire to travel, the outlook for Minnesota tourism in 2013 is positive. Leisure travel remains a high priority for consumers. However, travel patterns have changed significantly over the past several years. As consumers looked for ways to travel economically, there has been an increase in day trips, close-to-home travel, last-minute travel and shorter stays.

After decreases in leisure and business travel throughout the country in 2008 and 2009, a gradual recovery of travel began in 2010 and has continued since then. For the past two years, Minnesota tourism has experienced ongoing, modest growth in travel. Minnesota lodging properties are seeing increases in occupancy and room revenues. International visitation is up, as well, including a significant increase in the number of Canadians visiting Minnesota. In spite of the toll the recession has taken on the travel industry, three-fourths of Minnesota accommodation businesses report that they are in good financial health. (Explore Minnesota Tourism Summer 2013 Survey)

Consumers are still keeping a close watch on their pocketbooks and respond to travel marketing messages that emphasize value, both good value for the price and the intrinsic value of travel experiences. The continued growth in the use of social media and online travel planning offers opportunities to cost-effectively reach consumers. The trend of closer-to-home travel can benefit Minnesota, which draws most of its visitors from neighboring states and from Minnesota itself.

ADVERTISING

Explore Minnesota Tourism strategically uses various advertising tactics, including media partnerships, to promote awareness of Minnesota as a travel destination. Media budget allocations are: 65% in out-of-state markets and 35 % in Minnesota; seasonal breakdowns are 58% for spring/summer, 20% for fall, and 22% for winter. Advertising tactics are directed at the following marketing goals:

- Grow unique website visitors year-over-year.

- Measure website consumer engagement via Google Analytics.
- Attain leads including e-newsletter subscriptions, social media fans and followers and publication and itinerary requests.
- Increase partnership opportunities and leverage in-kind and/or cash contributions.
- Maintain awareness levels in core markets.

Tactics

Television

- Continue the "More to Explore" campaign throughout 2013.
- Television ads will be broadcast in Minnesota, Iowa and Wisconsin during spring and summer.
- Add television flights to fall and winter media plans in limited markets.
- Explore media partnerships and promotions, which may include sweepstakes, contests, promotional events, and significant added value.

Measurements:

Awareness as benchmarked in annual ROI study

General awareness measured through phone calls and website traffic, overlaid with geographic information and dates of television buys

Radio

Continue partnership with the Minnesota Broadcasters Association for radio coverage throughout the state. Ads will be produced as part of the "More to Explore" campaign with specific seasonal calls-to-action.

Measurements:

Conversion tracking on calls-to-action

Electronic Advertising

Explore Minnesota Tourism is shifting a majority of its media budget to electronic marketing. It is targeted, measurable and flexible. Banner ads and emails drive consumers to the website www.exploreminnesota.com. Seasonal banner ads are placed on local media sites, ad networks, Facebook, and sites for vertical activities (i.e., fishing, golf, biking, etc.). Emails are targeted by geographic and specific audience demographics and behaviors.

Measurements:

Impressions, click-throughs, conversions tracked for each online buy, and referral traffic from other sites is tracked

INTERACTIVE MARKETING

The state travel website, www.exploreminnesota.com, is the primary online travel planning resource Explore Minnesota Tourism provides for consumers. All Explore Minnesota advertising and publications direct consumers to this site, and paid keyword searches further drive consumers to the site for travel information. In 2012, Explore Minnesota Tourism launched a revamped mobile website and a new mobile application featuring active recreation. Explore Minnesota Tourism also promotes travel through various social media and blogs.

The Explore Minnesota Tourism website and other marketing programs rely heavily on comprehensive, detailed information on accommodations, attractions, destinations and events contained in a database that populates the website. These listings are provided free of charge to Minnesota's tourism organizations and businesses.

Tactics

Website: exploreminnesota.com

- Provide timely news, travel ideas, and appealing photography to generate interest in traveling in Minnesota.
- Provide detailed information for planning trips, including lodging, events, attractions, accommodation deals and seasonal reports.
- Offer e-newsletters and electronic versions of publications.
- Add brief videos on a variety of activities.
- Optimize the website (content, tags, etc.) to raise rankings on search engines.
- Manage an extensive travel information database, encouraging tourism businesses and organizations to enter and update their database listings.
- Provide advertising opportunities for enhanced visibility on the website for the tourism industry, and to generate revenues to support the website.
- Increase consumer engagement with the trip planner.
- Offer consumer participation through social sharing features (upload video, pictures, "like" buttons, etc.)
- Develop suggested travel itineraries to offer a library of options on the site.
- Enhance biking information available on the website.
- Explore expanded content on the website, including content partnerships with publishers.
- Encourage links from other sites to increase web traffic.
- Encourage the tourism industry to use our data widget to enhance their own websites.
- Provide on-the-road access to travel information via an enhanced mobile website and new mobile application.
- Maintain sub-sites for meeting planners, sports marketing and travel trade.

Measurements:

User sessions and page views on website and mobile site
Google Analytics for referral traffic and trip planner details
Search engine optimization outcomes
User engagement with Trip Planner and social media features
Downloads of the mobile app and data widget

Paid Keyword Search

- Nearly 20,000 keywords direct consumers using Google, Yahoo, or Bing search engines to specific content on www.exploreminnesota.com.
- Target words to specific holidays or travel opportunities (i.e. Valentine's Day, Memorial Day Weekend, MEA fall break, etc.).

Measurements:

Maintaining agreed upon cost-per-click (CPC) rates
Monthly recaps for total monthly expenditures, impressions, clicks, monthly CPC, and top search terms

Social Media

- Use Facebook, Twitter and You Tube to distribute timely marketing messages.
- Analyze website and search engine keywords to engage consumers with relevant content.
- Create blogs for conversations on topics of interest; further define blog marketing strategy and explore ways to push content from Explore Minnesota blogs to other active blogs.
- Use Real Simple Syndication (RSS) technology to place feeds on appropriate Web sites, blogs and other conversational marketing areas.
- Further explore marketing opportunities such as blogs, Internet forums, social networking sites, message boards and other forums that feature two-way conversation.

Measurements:

Web traffic from social media sites (particularly Facebook and Twitter)

The number of likes and followers on social networks

Viral distribution of messaging and leveraging opportunities to engage or share

CONSUMER PUBLICATIONS

Explore Minnesota Tourism publishes a variety of publications for consumers to generate travel by providing trip ideas, descriptions of destinations and activities, and travel planning information, and to link consumers to tourism businesses and organizations through advertising.

Tactics

- Publish the *Minnesota Travel Guide* annually to provide a comprehensive look at Minnesota as a travel destination, including activities, regions and lodging, to generate interest in travel to Minnesota and provide trip planning information. A fresh, new look was created for the 2012 Travel Guide.
- Publish the seasonal *Minnesota Explorer* newspaper to generate travel by publicizing new attractions, featuring specific activities and destinations, and providing a calendar of events.
- Publish a 2013-14 edition of statewide *Biking* guide in partnership with PedalMN, and produced through publishing partnership.
- Develop new 2013-14 edition of *State Highway Map* in partnership with Mn Bookstore and MnDOT.
- Develop new 2013-14 edition of *Minnesota Fishing* brochure, including relevant information from DNR.
- Distribute publications from other resources that provide statewide travel information on a specific activity, such as snowmobiling and ATV trails.
- Provide print advertising opportunities for the industry to link consumers directly with tourism businesses and destinations.
- Assure that consumers recognize our trusted brand by maintaining a consistent look and feel for Explore Minnesota publications.
- Increase reach by providing electronic versions of publications.

Measurements:

Consumer demand for publications

Participation of the industry as advertisers

Revenue and distribution goals achieved

Production and printing costs covered by publication ad revenues

MEDIA RELATIONS

Media relations programs are designed to position Minnesota tourism favorably in local, regional and national media, cost-effectively reaching broad audiences with information promoting Minnesota travel. Explore Minnesota Tourism works to generate coverage of Minnesota as a travel destination in print, electronic and broadcast media.

Tactics

- Develop a public relations plan for promoting Minnesota tourism.
- Communicate through the media the importance of tourism to the state's economy with information about business developments, research and trends related to tourism. Provide timely and compelling editorial ideas and related information to travel writers and editors.
- Connect media traveling to the state to generate travel stories with appropriate tourism industry contacts.
- Provide topical travel information through weekly radio interviews and other regular outlets in print and broadcast media.
- Provide photography and video to media for Minnesota travel stories.

- Utilize social media, including Twitter and blogs, to reach both media and consumers.
- Send regular emails to media contacts with current reports such as fishing, festival and events, fall color, and trail conditions.
- Provide media access to travel story ideas, contacts and other information about Minnesota travel topics through the media-focused website.
- Maintain and develop media contacts through professional associations such as the Society of American Travel Writers.
- Generate coverage of outdoor sports in Minnesota by providing media support for the Governor's Fishing Opener, Deer Opener and Pheasant Opener.
- Investigate options for a comprehensive media database.

Measurements:

Track contacts with media

Monitor coverage of Minnesota travel topics in the media and EMT sponsored statewide events

PARTNERSHIP MARKETING

Coordination among the state tourism office, Minnesota's tourism industry, and public and private sector partners allows Minnesota to compete more effectively in the marketplace. Leveraging each partner's assets broadens reach and increases the impact of marketing activities and promotions among key audiences.

Tactics

- Investigate development of a statewide brand for Minnesota in coordination with other public and private entities.
- Coordinate Minnesota tourism industry and Explore Minnesota marketing in ways that extend reach and impact in the market and avoid duplication.
- Develop shared marketing efforts with other state agencies, such as DNR, MnDOT, Minnesota Zoo, Minnesota State Lottery, Minnesota State Arts Board and Minnesota Historical Society.
- Evaluate the model for regional partnerships.
- Focus regional marketing initiatives on their unique tourism products, targeting specific consumer markets and generating inquiries or sales for destinations.
- Expand cooperative advertising opportunities for the tourism industry.
- Facilitate relationships between local tourism promotion organizations with common goals, to encourage consolidation and better efficiency of marketing efforts.
- Develop marketing partnerships focusing on vertical markets, such as golf, wildlife, arts, cultural heritage, etc.
- Develop a public/private marketing partnership to focus on biking.
- Develop a large-scale marketing partnership to expand awareness of Minnesota product, generate leads, drive web traffic, and secure significant in-kind value and/or cash contributions toward match requirements.

Measurements:

Inquiries generated by regional cooperative marketing

Inquiries generated through marketing partnerships

Number of user sessions on regional websites

Amount of in-kind and cash contributions

Number of participants in cooperative marketing programs

Evaluate the success of the cooperative advertising program

GROUP TOUR MARKETING

This program promotes Minnesota as a vacation destination to tour operators, travel agents, group leaders and travel trade publications throughout the U.S. Explore Minnesota Tourism works to attract new group tours to the state, and to increase the length of current tours.

Tactics

- Generate a positive Minnesota image among prospective group tour planners by participating in select trade shows and sales missions.
- Create awareness of Minnesota as a group tour destination through new and ongoing relationships with tour operators, group leaders, travel agents and travel trade media.
- Expand awareness of exploreminnesota.com through articles, information and links on websites of international travel companies, organizations and media.
- Provide planning materials and host familiarization tours to help tour operators develop successful Minnesota itineraries.
- Stimulate Minnesota industry support for group tour programs through regional association meetings, training events, individual consultation, group tour industry meetings, and a travel trade lead share program.
- Develop an online group tour training program for Minnesota industry to educate those new to this segment of the industry.
- Create awareness of statewide group tour product through media releases and editorial assistance.
- Develop an online strategy to assist group tour operators in tour planning through www.traveltrade.exploreminnesota.com ^[18].
- Coordinate a comprehensive industry review of group tour marketing.

Measurements:

Industry participation in shows, sales missions, and fam tours
 Attendance at Explore Minnesota group tour programs and training events
 Minnesota product in tour operator catalogs
 Number of quality leads from trade shows
 Web analytics on traveltrade.exploreminnesota.com
 Inquiries from tour operators
 Media coverage in travel trade publications

INTERNATIONAL MARKETING

Explore Minnesota Tourism aggressively promotes Minnesota as a travel destination to the international travel trade, including tour operators, receptive tour operators, travel agents and media. Target international markets are Canada, Mexico, United Kingdom, Japan, China, Germany, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. The international marketing program works to increase the number of international visitors, extend the length of stay in Minnesota, and expand the Minnesota product in tour operator catalogs.

Tactics

- Promote Minnesota as a travel destination by participating in trade shows and sales missions.
- Create awareness of Minnesota by hosting familiarization tours for tour operators, travel agents and international media.
- Gain efficiencies and expand awareness of the Minnesota travel product through participation in multi-state regional partnerships, including Great Lakes of North America, Mississippi River Country USA and Rocky Mountain International Gateway City Program.
- Expand awareness of exploreminnesota.com through articles, information and links on websites of international travel companies, organizations and media.
- Encourage Minnesota industry participation in international marketing through cooperative advertising projects, joint participation at trade events, familiarization tours, and the travel trade lead share program.
- Provide media relations to international consumer and travel trade media outlets through production of a press CD, news releases and hosting familiarization tours.
- Develop an integrated online strategy to provide Minnesota planning information for travel professionals on www.traveltrade.exploreminnesota.com ^[18].
- Continue to explore market potential of countries including Asian and Latin American markets.
- Research methods to track international visitation and economic impact on Minnesota.
- Coordinate a comprehensive industry review of international marketing.

Measurements:

Industry participation in shows, sales missions, ad buys and fam tours
Documented Minnesota product with international operators
Number of fam tours, including operators and media
Number of quality leads from trade shows
Web analytics on www.traveltrade.exploreminnesota.com ^[18] from target countries
Media coverage in international publications

MEETINGS AND CONVENTIONS

Explore Minnesota Tourism is developing a presence in the meetings and conventions market. Although meeting and convention marketing is a primary focus for Minnesota's convention and visitor bureaus, this is a new emphasis for Explore Minnesota Tourism. The goal is to increase the number of meetings and conventions held in Minnesota, and to increase attendance at these events.

Tactics

- Create a platform for brand awareness of Minnesota as a meeting destination.
- Encourage meetings and convention attendees to extend their stay and return for future visits to Minnesota.
- Provide the "Meet in Minnesota" brand and coordinate Minnesota presence at select regional, national and international trade shows.
- Provide grants within the Organizational Partnership Program for meetings and conventions marketing.
- Enhance meetings and conventions information on MeetinMinnesota.com.
- Seek a private sector partner for ongoing participation in "Meet in Minnesota" marketing.

Measurements:

Number of meetings and conventions held/booked/attendees (in-state and out of state) in participating communities compared to previous year, based on annual reports
Measure value of public relations efforts
Participation of communities in co-op opportunities, e.g. advertising, trade shows, database

SPORTS MARKETING

Sports marketing has been identified as a growth area for Minnesota. Explore Minnesota Tourism will lay the groundwork for a statewide marketing effort to attract amateur sporting events to sports facilities in Minnesota communities.

Tactics

- Promote MinnesotaSports.org as a resource for sports and tournament planners.
- Develop a logo for Minnesota sports and incorporate into banners, promotional items, video and overall branding efforts.
- Assist organizations and event owners with recruiting tournaments to Minnesota.
- Use sports-related trade shows to promote awareness of Minnesota as an event destination.
- Coordinate with events to create and distribute press materials to sports media contacts.
- Maximize exposure through existing sporting events within and outside of Minnesota.
- Maintain a photo library resource.
- Coordinate letters of support at a state level to accompany bid proposals.
- Identify private sector partners and resources to support sports marketing efforts

Measurement:

Number of listings in sports marketing database

TRAVEL INFORMATION NETWORK

Explore Minnesota Tourism provides travel information to consumers through its contact center, travel

information centers, various publication distribution programs and other direct communication with the public.

Tactics

- Provide tourism information to travelers on the road by staffing ten travel information centers on major highways through partnerships with community and educational organizations.
- Adjust staffing and days/hours of operation to changing consumer travel patterns.
- Distribute state travel publications through a network of local information centers designated as affiliates to Explore Minnesota Tourism.
- Explore use of new, innovative digital tools to serve travelers at Travel Information Centers.
- Provide in-person travel planning assistance, including customized travel planning, through knowledgeable phone center staff, and pursue ways to market the opportunity to speak to a "real" person.
- Institute a training program for travel counselors, both public and private.
- Provide distribution programs for tourism industry brochures to consumers via the St. Paul Contact Center, Mall of America, Minneapolis/Saint Paul International Airport, travel information centers and consumer shows.

Measurements:

Number of travelers served at travel information centers

Number of consumers served through the contact center via phone, mail and email

Number of subscribers to email newsletters

Number of organizations & businesses in database and providing updates

Number of communities participating in brochure distribution program

GRANT PROGRAMS

Explore Minnesota Tourism grant programs are designed to create effective public/nonprofit partnerships that generate increased overnight travel in Minnesota and support innovative and effective tourism marketing and research. Grant recipients provide matching funding.

Tactics

- Implement and evaluate a scaled-back grant program combining Organizational Partnership Grants and Scenic Byways grants to attract nonresident travelers to the state and encourage Minnesota residents to travel within the state.
- Operate a crisis grant program to address emergency tourism marketing needs that significantly impact a traveler's interest in or ability to travel to a destination.

Measurement:

Project by project basis

Survey of grant recipients to estimate economic return to communities

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS AND INDUSTRY COMMUNICATIONS

Explore Minnesota Tourism offers educational opportunities to share trends and resources, encourage innovation and growth, and nurture networking among industry colleagues. Formalized educational opportunities as well as ongoing communications resources are available.

Tactics

- Hold a statewide tourism conference that provides timely information on tourism marketing and travel trends and offers opportunities for industry collaboration.
- Organize tourism development workshops to address social media training on effective use of Twitter and Facebook.
- Coordinate with regional tourism associations on education and programming.

- Broaden audience for *EMT Express*, an electronic newsletter that gives the tourism industry timely updates on programs and resources.
- Operate and promote industry.exploreminnesota.com, an industry resource for marketing programs, research, industry calendars, partners, news and contacts.
- Generate an annual report, guide to EMT programs and other resources for the tourism industry.
- Coordinate with other agencies, organizations and educational institutions on tourism education and training through workshops, Web sites or other methods.
- Develop crisis communication and action plans in response to disaster situations that could impact tourism.

Measurements:

Attendance at and evaluation of tourism conference and other educational programs
 User sessions and page views of www.industry.exploreminnesota.com website
 Industry satisfaction survey

PUBLIC POLICY LEADERSHIP

Tourism is a vital element of Minnesota's economic development, diversification and rural development. Public policy issues, including workforce, border security, resource preservation, transportation and funding, impact Minnesota tourism. These issues require leadership and advocacy to help public officials make informed decisions.

Tactics

- Develop tourism strategies, programs and policies with the Explore Minnesota Tourism Council.
- Analyze key public policy issues and develop positions on statewide issues that support the growth of tourism.
- Pursue a long-term funding strategy to grow Minnesota tourism promotion and economic impact.
- Participate in United States Travel Association and National Council of State Travel Directors Leadership functions.

Measurement:

Industry satisfaction survey

RESEARCH

Explore Minnesota Tourism uses research from a variety of resources and also conducts its own customer and industry surveys. Research results inform marketing decisions and all Explore Minnesota Tourism programs and are shared with Minnesota's tourism industry.

Tactics

- Provide information on the economic impact of tourism, including traveler spending, jobs and wages, and tax revenues generated.
- Provide economic impact information by county and region, as well as state.
- Conduct a return on investment study to evaluate the effectiveness of statewide advertising programs and provide information about Explore Minnesota Tourism customers.
- Confirm our target audiences via a deep segmentation study of consumers throughout the Midwest.
- Use available data to measure Minnesota's and competing states' market share of domestic travel.
- Conduct or arrange for other studies as needed.
- Monitor and report on industry trends, conducting periodic surveys of Minnesota's tourism industry.

- Collect and compile lodging tax information on a quarterly basis.
- Disseminate key data and findings on economic impact and travel trends to the tourism industry.