

4.2. Design online and mobile communication tools to meet the evolving needs of visitors

This Strategic Action strengthens Montana's tourism marketing efforts.

Recommended Tactics

MTOT, Regions, CVBs

- » Ensure that websites and mobile resources effectively meet the information needs of visitors, as identified by research and analysis (see Strategic Action 4.1.).
- » Ensure that websites are optimized for mobile access to the extent that is (i) justified by research and web analytics and (ii) feasible within resource and infrastructure constraints.
- » Ensure that MTOT, Region, and CVB sites and content are seamlessly integrated to lead the visitor through inspiration, orientation, and facilitation. Individual online and mobile components should work together to form an effective system for providing visitor information throughout the travel planning process.
- » Convey the Montana Brand pillars clearly and consistently to inspire the visitor.
- » Present content that is experiential and engaging to inspire the visitor.
- » Include good, functional maps to help the visitor with orientation and trip planning.
- » Include traveler tips or itinerary ideas to help the visitor with orientation and facilitation, and to encourage longer trips and more destinations.
- » Ensure that, together, the MTOT, regions, and CVBs sites and content contain *comprehensive* information on attractions, activities, amenities, and services. This helps the visitor with facilitation, makes the official Montana tourism sites a valuable trip-planning tool, and will encourage longer trips and more stops.
- » Make the comprehensive information digestible and manageable by *highlighting* top attractions or amenities (e.g. Top 5 lists). This will help the visitor with trip planning (facilitation) and also reinforces inspiration.
- » Integrate user-generated content (e.g. ratings and reviews, online community discussions, travel blogs), as appropriate, to strengthen credibility, inspiration, and trip-planning value for the visitor.
- » Integrate social media channels, as appropriate, to offer greater interaction capabilities desired by a growing number of travelers.
- » Provide greater transaction capabilities (e.g. booking, ticketing), when justified by research and analysis (see Strategic Action 4.1) and feasible.
- » Evaluate online/mobile presence from the visitor's perspective for usability, functionality, content value, and appeal.
- » Incorporate new technologies and applications (e.g., apps, interactive capabilities, transaction

capabilities) where supported by research and analysis (see Strategic Action 4.1). Identify an explicit role that each can fulfill successfully and incorporate it holistically into the visitor information system.

- » Encourage and guide stakeholders to meet evolving visitor information needs, as identified through research and analysis (see Strategic Action 4.1.).
- » Provide financial and technical assistance to help stakeholders meet evolving visitor information needs, within the guidelines of MTOT's grants and assistance programs.

Communities, Tribes, Businesses & Organizations

- » Provide MTOT, Regions, and CVBs with the comprehensive visitor information they need to make their websites an effective online presence for your community/tribe.
- » Link websites clearly to the MTOT, Region, and CVB websites.
- » If the community/tribe website will also serve as a significant source of visitor information, ensure that:
 - development and resource allocation are guided by web analytics, research and analysis (see Strategic Action 4.1);
 - visitor information always includes those assets and amenities that are relevant to visitors but lie outside the city limits; and
 - the website meets the basic needs of visitors, for example: provide a map of the town; do not bury visitor information in the website; feature visitor-appropriate content such as the top five things to see and do; and include inspiring images of the community and its surroundings.
- » Where possible, link to electronic word-of-mouth to improve the usefulness of, credibility of, and visitor satisfaction with the official tourism websites.
- » Optimize websites for mobile access to the extent that is (i) justified by research and web analytics and (ii) feasible within resource and infrastructure constraints (see Strategic Action 4.7.).
- » Incorporate newly emerging methods of delivering visitor information that are supported by research and analysis (see Strategic Action 4.1) and viable within resource constraints.

Businesses & Organizations

- » Ensure that the business/organization website contains accurate and complete information and that such information is provided (and updated) as appropriate to MTOT, Regions, and CVBs.
- » Integrate ratings and reviews and social media into the website, where appropriate and beneficial.
- » Link directly to online communities and discussions where the business, attraction, community or area receives positive word-of-mouth (see also Strategic Action 5.6).

- » Where supported by research, analysis, and analytics (see Strategic Action 4.1.), optimize the website for mobile access so that visitors can access the most important information and carry out the most important tasks (e.g. find hours of operation, view a menu, book a room).
- » Provide or link to online transaction capabilities (booking or ticketing) to facilitate visitation, if appropriate and feasible.
- » Incorporate newly emerging methods of delivering visitor information that are supported by research and analysis (see Strategic Action 4.1) and viable within resource constraints.

Indicators of Success

- » Development of online and mobile communications tools is guided by research and analysis (see Strategic Action 4.1.).
- » MTOT, Region, and CVB websites are functionally integrated to meet visitor needs and to provide a system for visitor inspiration, orientation, and facilitation.
- » Online and mobile technologies are selected and applied to form an effective system.
- » Comprehensive content needed for trip planning (attractions, amenities, events, services, reviews, mapping, etc.) is integrated by MTOT, the Regions and CVB's.
- » Online/mobile information is presented in a way that is experiential, engaging, and easily digestible.
- » A cohesive and consistent presentation of the Montana Brand is found throughout the online/mobile content.
- » Ratings and reviews and other user-generated content are incorporated effectively.
- » The need for interaction and transaction capabilities has been addressed, as appropriate.
- » Stakeholders are familiar with the electronic resources available through MTOT, Region, and CVBs and have the fundamental skills to make use of them.

Background & Rationale

Travelers deliberately make plans that are not highly structured and specific, so that they can enjoy experiences that present themselves during the trip. However, they also spend a considerable time thinking about and planning possible activities, both before they visit and during the visit itself. In fact, information search is a significant part of the purchase decision, and online information is the dominant source of visitor information. Official tourism websites are therefore an important touch point and can contribute significantly to destination competitiveness through “inbound marketing” by providing information that is ample, useful, and appealing.

Inbound marketing rests upon providing exceptional content that attracts and converts prospects to customers (visitors). It is “pull” marketing, as opposed to traditional “push” marketing, and is increasingly recognized for its effective (and cost-effective) use of Web 2.0. Good tourism websites will draw in and inspire potential visitors, allowing them to begin imagining and planning a trip. The inbound marketing complements traditional outbound marketing campaigns. The outbound campaigns put Montana top of mind and inspire thoughts of travel to Montana. The inbound marketing converts those potential visitors by making it easy and enjoyable for them to take the next step in trip planning.

A significant competitive weakness identified through Montana’s branding research is the perception of the state as a “risky” destination. This isn’t a concern about danger; rather risk refers to the perceived remoteness and a possible lack of amenities that increase the “risk” that one’s trip won’t be enjoyable. Reassuring visitors that amenities and services are available and of known quality by providing comprehensive visitor information can reduce the perceived “risk”. The more information they find, the less risky Montana appears, and the better the customer needs can be met and served.

Research shows that an online presence must:

- » clearly convey the Montana Brand to build deliverable expectations;
- » provide sufficient relevant information for trip planning decisions to help the visitor find what he or she is seeking from the trip;
- » make the large amount of content manageable and customizable, by highlighting or ranking items (e.g., “top 5” lists);
- » include maps to provide orientation and context and help visitors plan an itinerary that is feasible;
- » offer itinerary ideas to serve as a boiler plate and make trip planning easier;
- » allow visitors to save items to a “backpack” or “bucket list” so that they can build an itinerary organically over time; and
- » be not just easy, but *enjoyable* for the visitor to use.

A good online presence – functional and enjoyable to use – improves the visitor experience, promoting return visits and positive word-of-mouth.

Following the lead of other industries, tourism websites may need to evolve from static provision of information to integrating elements of communication, interaction (relationship building), and electronic transactions. While tourism has lagged behind in this regard, some state and local DMOs are now beginning to adopt these functionalities, making them a potential competitive factor in the near future.