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LLOYD D. LEVENSON INSTITUTE OF GAMING, HOSPITALITY & TOURISM

Hunterdon County Tourism Research Initiative Phase 3: Marketing Consultation & Strategy for Implementation Report – August 2019

Jennifer Barr, PhD
Professor of Business Studies, Marketing
Lloyd D. Levenson Institute of Gaming, Hospitality & Tourism
Stockton University

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Executive Summary

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 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, an artisan culture, etc., it is not considered a top-of-mind tourism destination. A four-pronged approach is needed to effectively market Hunterdon County.

First, crafting an umbrella brand strategy would project a solid identity for the tourism region. An integrated marketing communications approach should be used with simplicity, clarity and consistency as top priorities. Second, the region lacks a high-tech, high-touch experience for travelers. A tourism website and entry portal managed by a dedicated DMO is essential to establishing and managing a uniform brand image and all related activities. It will also legitimize the region as a year-round tourism destination with multiple offerings. Third, a stellar social media program, remarkable advertising and elegant collateral materials will reinforce the effort and attract various market segments. Fourth, in order for a comprehensive strategy to succeed, all towns and individual businesses must be wedded to the initiative and willing to subsume current marketing activities into the Hunterdon County brand. Building brand equity is a long-term process that requires substantial commitment as well as the pooling of talent and resources.

Technological advancements (digital, mobile) and visitors' values and expectations (social movements like farm-to-table, authentic local experiences) are overarching influences in destination marketing today. This is consistent with some of the top travel trends for 2019 including weekend trips and short getaways, food tourism, families seeking adventure and the impact of the Instagram platform. Hunterdon County's offerings mirror most of the shifts as do notable DMO models like 1Berkshire and DiscoverLancaster. A palpable difference is that the latter two have an established identity that permeates the respective websites, social media platforms and other forms of promotion. The findings for direct DMO competitors, VisitBucksCounty and TravelHudsonValley, were similar.

Hunterdon County has an abundance of brand assets that have resulted in delighted customers who return regularly to the area. Brand storytelling opportunities are intrinsic to the region and some examples include the Red Mill Museum renaissance, the Ironbound agro-tourism model and the ArtYard community-minded project. There are many meaningful, compelling reasons for visiting Hunterdon County, and customer testimonials and social influencers will be pivotal to shaping the brand through word-of-mouth.

Potential brand themes include arts and culture, agro-tourism, 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 to entice prospects, ideally accompanied by an app. There are also several annual events revolving around seasons and holidays in Hunterdon County that should be promoted on a "10 things to do list" or a monthly online calendar of events. As an avenue to elevating awareness about the area as a top-of-mind tourism destination, two regional events should be organized each year. Possibilities include an Octoberfest and a "Welcome to Summer" celebration.

Understanding life stage marketing and tracking segments as they transition generationally is crucial 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. Based on the findings from Phase 2, family travel is predominant and most visitors have party sizes ranging from 3-6. On-site interviews with business owners indicated that Millennials are an untapped market possibly because they rely so heavily on technology to research and commit to a destination. They often travel with groups of friends and their lodging preference is Airbnb or great outdoors excursions. In addition to life stage and generation, two other viable segmentation criteria are usage patterns (frequency of visit, length of visit) and destination purpose. 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.

Introduction

A three-phase study was commissioned by the Hunterdon County Board of Chosen Freeholders and funded through a grant by the New Jersey Highlands Council. The Hunterdon County Chamber of Commerce, Hunterdon County Office of Economic Development and the Delaware River Towns Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Bureau championed the effort.

This report encompasses the final phase of the study and was informed by the findings of the previous phases as well as extensive secondary research, anecdotal evidence from social media/customer reviews, on-site 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.

Situation Analysis

Hunterdon County (hereafter referred to as "HC") 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 or overnight guests.

HC is a tourism destination that includes 26 municipalities with historic roots, majestic beauty and small-town charm. The Delaware River Towns and various main streets are major draws.

HC is seeking to grow its tourism revenues and, in the process, appeal to new target markets using a multi-generational approach. It is also interested in a marketing strategy that will position HC as a distinctive brand in a uniquely competitive space.

SWOT Analysis

A detailed SWOT analysis is provided in Appendix A. Highlights for each section are noted below.

Primary strengths include unwavering support by two DMOs and two government organizations; a very strong sense of community pride and focus on delivering exceptional customer experiences across the region; highly satisfied customers who often return to the region; a bucolic and breathtaking setting; easy access by car from New York and Pennsylvania; a plethora of brand assets; and, many brand storytelling opportunities.

The primary weakness is that a distinctive brand identity does not exist for HC so it is not perceived as a comprehensive tourism destination. So awareness levels are low. Also, there is not a dedicated DMO for travel and tourism for HC. Other weaknesses include inadequate and expensive lodging; the region lacking a high-tech, high-touch experience; independent marketing and branding programs for towns and businesses; and, lack of data.

Opportunities include steady national and state growth in tourism for the last several years; 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; and, HC being poised to respond to the "work, play, life balance" travel trend.

The primary threat is competition; specifically, Bucks County and the Hudson Valley. Other threats include buy-in of all internal stakeholders into a unified tourism brand program; loss of hotel revenue nationally to Airbnb; a high second-home population; and, an inability to attract younger demographics to live and work in the region

Marketing Challenges

The primary marketing challenges faced by HC are fourfold:

1. *Lack of a brand image/identity*. Brands deliver value to customers through significant points of difference. Associations are then created which shape perceptions and, ultimately, experiences. Although HC is abundant in gems that include rolling farms, a historic river, beautiful countryside, exceptional winery and dining experiences, sophisticated and tranquil lodging, an artisan culture, etc., it is not considered 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.

2. *Dedicated website and entry portal*. The government organizations and chambers are crucial to promoting tourism and vested in the vitality of all businesses in the various towns in HC. In fact, the Hunterdon County Board of Freeholders is the first link that appears when conducting a search for HC. Similarly, users are directed to the Hunterdon County Chamber of Commerce via the [New Jersey DMOs](#) page (notably, links for most other DMOs on the site use visuals and are traveler focused). Although informational, visitors engaged in the search effort are interested in a website devoted to tourism offerings. It is often the first touch point in the user search experience which should feed into others (both tangible and intangible). A dedicated website managed by a separate destination marketing organization is essential to establishing a brand image/identity for HC that will be immediately recognizable across all forms of communication. It will also legitimize HC as a year-round tourism destination with multiple offerings for both prospective and returning visitors.

3. *Carving out a niche for HC in a competitive DMO arena*. Regionally, primary country escape competitors Bucks County and Hudson County have achieved high awareness levels through stellar and consistent marketing. Other Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York towns are also viable threats for tourism dollars. A strong brand presence on travel/dining and crowd-sourced review sites like Yelp and TripAdvisor is essential.

Moreover, targeted social media marketing and messaging, remarkable advertising and elegant collateral materials will reinforce efforts and attract various market segments.

4. *Buy-in of towns/individual businesses and internal branding*. Since HC does not have a comprehensive tourism brand, towns and businesses have understandably engaged in separate and proprietary marketing/promotion activities to both attract and retain customers. In order for a holistic branding strategy to succeed, all internal stakeholders must be wedded to the initiative and willing to subsume current activities into the HC brand. Building brand equity is a long-term process that requires substantial commitment as well as the pooling of talent and resources.

Paradigm Shift in Travel and Tourism

Technology and travelers have spurred the paradigm shift in travel and tourism. More specifically, the transformation has occurred due to specific technological advancements (digital, platform-based businesses, mobile) and alignment with visitors' values and expectations (sustainability/social movements like farm-to-table, authentic local experiences).

Seamless integration of technology for disseminating information to users, a comprehensive travel partner network and cultivating communities through social media and local experts have also been instrumental in shaping the new ecosystem. The noted trends as well as others are reflected in the framework below.
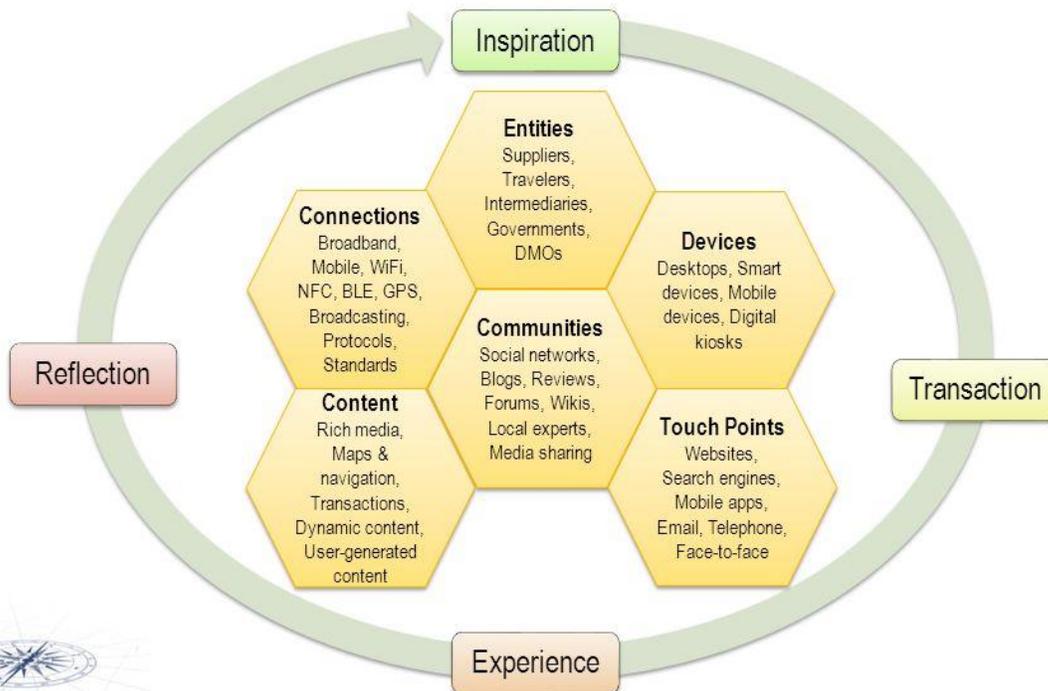
FIGURE 2.1 The digital tourism ecosystem

Source: The digital tourism ecosystem

"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." (7) Immersing visitors in foodie-related experiences such as cooking classes and wine-making are highly desirable. Promoting a destination based on a unique historic event or pop culture is also likely to resonate. And highly personalized interactions achieved through, for example, a mobile app 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." (7) 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. (7)

DMO Best Practices and Trends

Visuals and content across all forms of digital and collateral communication 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." (8)

The DMO website, in particular, is crucial to the customer journey. It should be easy to navigate, display information clearly, inspire and, above all, be helpful (9). First impressions of a website are formed in .05 seconds so the above-the-fold content is crucial. Greenland.com has effectively achieved a visual brand that conveys adventure, nature and being a pioneer. (8)
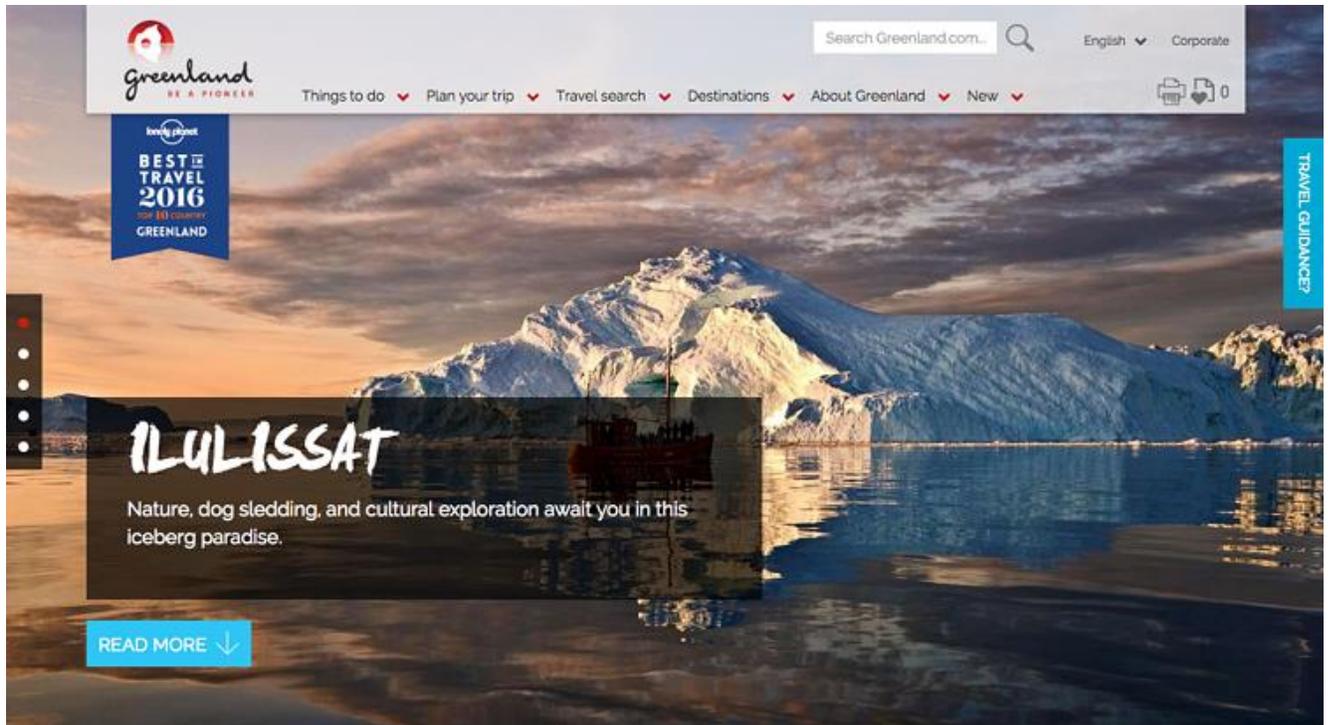
Source: 8 destination strategies with the highest ROI

A DMO website should also be regularly updated and mobile ready. In fact, mobile bookings in travel grew 1700% between 2011 and 2015 (8) and 61% of travelers in the U.S. booked and paid for travel through their smartphone during 2018. (10) So a cohesive digital presence and collaborative network of travel partners/suppliers who can cross-sell (e.g., lodging with excursions) is essential for unifying 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." (8)

Visitors also value tabs on the navigation bar at the top of a website or in a simple side menu on a mobile device. All contact information should be easy to find with phone lines, email support and/or chat services like the image below. (9)

The top five travel trends for 2019 include:

1. Weekend trips and short getaways: over half of all travelers report that they plan to take more weekend and mini-trips in 2019 and they are seeking "authentic experiences that are personal, rewarding and tailored to their interests." (11) DMOs should strive to reach target markets that are within a three-hour driving radius of the destination, and collaborate with local stakeholders to craft short-term packages that encourage overnight stays.

2. Food tourism: as noted previously, demand for curating culinary experiences continues to grow. Social media is driving the trend due to travelers sharing their edible experiences and photos, and Instagram is the preferred platform. This presents opportunities for DMOs "to craft unique itineraries that appeal to foodies, wine connoisseurs, craft beer enthusiasts, and the like." (11)

3. Bleisure travel: in 2017, over 60% of business trips were extended to include leisure time, representing about a 40% increase from the prior year. The three most popular bleisure activities are sightseeing, dining and arts/culture offering DMOs opportunities to deliver value added through incentive packages or lodging discounts to attendees who extend their stay.

4. <u>Families want adventure</u>: children are key influencers in family travel planning, and families are foregoing traditional vacations (beach, Disney) "in favor of adventurous, off-the-beaten-path experiences." (11) This trend is expected to continue, presenting multi-generational family travel experience opportunities for DMOs that will require family-friendly language, imagery, collateral and itineraries.

5. <u>Instagram is taking center stage</u>: this is a reoccurring theme across secondary research. The "insta-tourism" platform is an important marketing tool, inspiring travelers to visit destinations based on photogenic visuals on the site. So DMOs must maintain an active presence on Instagram. Notably, people engage with the site 10 times more than with Facebook, making it an ideal place to feature distinctive offerings. (11) And partnerships with social influencers dedicated to travel and tourism is a highly effective way to pique interest and influence the travel plans of prospects.

Notable DMO Models

The DMO models below were recommended by LIGHT and reviewed for this study.

Berkshires, MA (1Berkshire.com)
Finger Lakes, NY (FingerLakes.org)
Lancaster, PA (DiscoverLancaster.com)
Richmond, VA (VisitRichmondVA.com)
Southern Shore, NJ (NJSouthernShore.com)

Generally, the websites and collateral materials exuded a local lifestyle and culture magazine feel that is rather different from the static, typical images (e.g., beds in guestrooms) that have historically defined the field. Facebook pages mirrored the respective branding strategies and the VisitRichmondVA Facebook was a standout. The site uses movement and music to garner attention through a cover video that transports the visitor. The brand assets are beautifully captured and quotes from credible sources like *Forbes,* bicycling.com and *The Daily Meal* tell the story. The DiscoverLancaster Facebook is also well designed with crisp, colorful photos.

Three of the DMOs were evaluated in detail for the reasons provided in each section.

1Berkshire.com

Formed in 2016 through a merger of four countrywide economic development organizations with a dual-focus on economic development and promotion of the region as a preferred place to visit, live and grow a business. The concerted effort facilitated leveraging resources, improving efficiency, expanding audience reach and coordinating programs to benefit the overall region. Stakeholders encompass a board of directors, investors network (includes the business community), the creative economy, entrepreneurs and young professionals.

In 2019, the Berkshire Blueprint 2.0 was launched and is a culmination of two years of research and planning for implementing a new strategic imperative across The Berkshires. (12) It is apparent from the high-quality website that considerable time and effort was invested in recasting a brand image that was consistent with the DMO's goals.

This model is aligned with the goals of HC from both a tourism and urban development perspective. It was gleaned from the interviews with various HC business owners/operators and politicians that in addition to creating an umbrella tourism brand, attracting a younger demographic to the area to live and raise a family was an imperative. (13)

DiscoverLancaster.com

The region is promoted as a single entity revolving around the theme "Discover Lancaster." The visually appealing website is expressive, effectively conveying an experience that includes dining, lodging and unique offerings like Amish tours. A farm-to-table video reinforces the agro-tourism industry which is so intrinsic to Lancaster County's history and culture. Regions and Towns is the first link on the site and directs visitors to a separate web page, showcasing five distinct tourism destinations. This aligns nicely with the infrastructure of HC and potential for clustering municipalities (e.g., Delaware River Towns) based on proximity and offerings.

NJSouthernShore.com

Cape May County partnered with Cumberland County to form Southern Shore Regional. The DMO strives to improve the business climate in New Jersey by promoting tourism to both Cape May and Cumberland Counties in a targeted geographic area and, in the process, assist member businesses by growing demand for travel to the region.

The oversized visuals on the website are crisp and breathtakingly beautiful. They successfully capture and convey the natural resources, culinary delights and variety of activities like the beach and bird watching. The photos convey multi-generational interests which is consistent with a strategy that should be used by HC. Moreover, once HC cements a distinctive and compelling brand identity in the regional DMO 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.

Directly Competitive DMOs

Bucks County (VisitBucksCounty.com) and the Hudson Valley (TravelHudsonValley.com) were identified as direct competitors. (13) The opening page on the Bucks County website is ripe with visuals but it 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, like VisitRichmondVA, 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 phenomena is captured in a seminal advertising monograph that "we taste the image, drink the label…" (14) when referring to classic campaigns like Absolut and Marlboro.

Hudson Valley's most well-known natural asset is showcased consistently on the site. "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 [HudsonValley Facebook](#) page is laden with beautiful visuals.

<h3 style="text-align:center">Airbnb Partnership</h3>

Airbnb has significantly disrupted the lodging industry, experiencing 100% year-over-year growth since its inception in 2008 in 10 key hotel markets in the U.S. (3) The travel platform generated $93M in profit in 2017 with nearly 660,000 listings (4). The threat has been palpable with hotels losing about $450M in direct revenues annually to Airbnb (4), and it has encroached on travel destinations large and small in the country.

Given the fact that lodging availability, room capacity and a premium-pricing structure cannot adequately accommodate substantial and extended overnight stays to HC (1), it would be logical to partner with Airbnb hosts (preferably super hosts) who live in the region. This will also entice younger markets to HC because Airbnb is typically 6-17% less expensive than a regional hotel's average daily rate (4). In particular, Millennials prefer Airbnb stays or, alternatively, great outdoors adventures.

Although it is anticipated that the Airbnb partnership suggestion will be met with some resistance from existing HC lodging owners and other interested parties, it is highly likely that overall tourism spend to the region would increase. The move would also result in greater social media exposure and buzz, and visitors would experience greater authenticity through the lens of local hosts.

<h3 style="text-align:center">Brand Strategy</h3>

Branding is a strategic process that combines all tangible and intangible benefits to establish a differential advantage in a competitive space. Authenticity, credibility and distinctiveness are hallmarks of iconic and sustainable brand platforms (see figure below). Two significant paradigm shifts have occurred during the past several years fueled by more sophisticated consumers, the impact of technology and the rise of social media. The first is that brand

"ownership" has moved from organization to customer. And the second is the morphing of brand personality into brand communities with an experiential flavor.

In this section, brand association, brand meaning and brand architecture ideas are presented for consideration by HC. Brand assets, brand storytelling opportunities and the importance of brand communities and social influencers are also addressed.

*For the purpose of this study, the municipalities that have focused heavily on tourism and/or have unique offerings will be highlighted. It is recognized that every stakeholder, including all residents, business owners and government officials/employees are vital to the success of the initiative. Pooling talent and resources is essential. As the brand strategy development process takes shape, other municipalities can be folded into the orchestrated effort.

[*Note: The region is comprised of 437.44 square miles (5) and 26 counties. One of the advantages from a tourism perspective is that a visitor can travel by car from one end of the area to another in approximately 45 minutes.]

Brand Association and Brand Position

Brand association is a deep-rooted image, attitude and/or feeling formed in the minds of customers and achieved, in large part, through effective design and consistent communication.

A distinct brand position (also known as "mental real estate") is established through brand meaning and reinforced by touch points.

Brand strength is found in brand meaning and HC offerings are highly valued as evidenced by the survey results in Phase 2 and the dominant images in the word cloud; namely, "small town," "love," "fun," "family," "music" and "nice." (2) These sentiments were echoed in customer reviews on various Facebook sites (provided below). Customer delight is a common thread:

- "Tonight a jazz trip, Sinatra Hits 6-piece band, acoustic guitar soloist and so much more! Charming town along the waterfall, cute shops - including ice cream and a great coffee cafe. Summer-long entertainment in Clinton." ([Clinton](#))
- "Very nice, eclectic place for shopping, browsing, river walk and great dining choices in both New Hope, PA and Lambertvile, NJ!" ([Delaware River Towns](#))
- "Love this community event each year! The bed races, the music, the fireworks and the people are all great!!! Looking forward to another awesome year!" ([Milford](#))
- "I used to live in Pennington and Flemington was always my favorite place to go as often as possible. Have family there too. It's the atmosphere, the products, the area, the people, it's relaxing, it's fun." ([Flemington](#))

Scanning the qualitative comments from Phase 2 as well as online reviews conveyed visitors' strong emotional bonds to the region. The power and endurance of interactions with business owners, employees and other community representatives was also palpable. Moreover, the fact that 91% of survey respondents indicated they were likely to return to HC and 89% were likely to recommend HC serve as powerful endorsements for the region. (2)

The front-line touch points noted in the prior paragraph are crucial to personalizing and reinforcing relationships with customers. Other traditional touch points include advertising, signage and collateral materials. In recent years, digital touch points like owned websites, third-party websites (TripAdvisor), apps, social media sites, e-mail blasts, customer reviews, etc. have become invaluable.

Finally, the market position for HC cannot be ascertained or articulated because a comprehensive brand strategy is needed. Ideally, HC will eventually "own" a word or phrase that will capture and distinguish the destination. Although the brand promise/value proposition is being delivered through separate town events as well as and shopping, dining and lodging establishments, it is piecemeal at best.

Brand Assets

Brand assets are versatile and plentiful as indicated in Phase 2 and derived from on-site interviews with business owners and government officials/employees.

When researching top 10 things to do in HC, the five top non-sponsored links on *Yelp* were Mad Lavender Farm (Milford), Crayola Experience (Easton, Pa.), Philadelphia's Magic Gardens, Beneduce Vineyards in Pittstown and Shady Brook Farm (Yardley, Pa.) (6). Only two were actually located in HC which is indicative of the lack of a concerted branding effort. This can be easily remedied through a consolidated branding campaign reinforced through social media, advertising and collateral programs.

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

- Clinton Red Mill Museum Village: listed in the top 10 of most photographed sites in the country (1)
- Ironbound Hard Cider: sourcing, products and the story surrounding the agro-tourism business model (13)
- The Stockton Market: only artisanal market of its kind in HC (13)
- Delaware River Towns (Milford, Lambertville, Frenchtown, Stockton)
- The Woolverton Inn: ranked among the top 10 B&Bs in the country by www.bedandbreakfast.com (13)
- Covered bridge in Delaware Township: only remaining one in New Jersey (1)
- Steam engine excursion train between Lambertville and Flemington (1)
- Teaberry's Victorian tea house (1)
- Pony Pratt Truss Bridge: listed on the national register of historic places (1)
- South Branch of the Raritan River: rated one of the "ten best trout streams" in America by *Field and Stream* (1)

Other noteworthy offerings and happenings include:

- Vineyards (Beneduce, Grape Finale, Unionville, Old York, Mount Salem): potential wine tour opportunity
- 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 agro-tourism 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 HC brand to life in a way that is simple, moving and authentic. Based on the research conducted for this study, there are many stories surrounding HC history, community, culture, food and drink, and agro-tourism that would not only resonate with visitors but create lasting word-of-mouth and digital impressions. Some prospective stories include:

- The Red Mill Museum renaissance (and award-winning artists)
- The artisan Stockton Market
- The distinctive Ironbound agro-tourism model
- The Milford Alive small-town pride
- The ArtYard community-minded project (featured in a New York Times article on 7/27/19)
- Revolutionary War sites

Brand Communities and Social Influencers

The foundation of a strong DMO brand is an ability to foster deep community roots at the outset of the planning process. This is an internal branding initiative. The personification and vitality of the destination brand 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." (15) Savvy DMOs and tourism boards recognize the importance of creating value for *all* stakeholders including community residents, business owners and travelers. Successful DMOs have "… sung the praises of their destinations through authenticity, exposure, and untold stories." (16)

An instrumental component of touting brand communities beyond integrated marketing communications and branding strategies are social influencers. The two categories include macro-influencers (40 best travel influencers on Instagram) and micro-influencers. The former have the power to elevate awareness swiftly on an aggregate albeit impersonal level. Comparatively, the latter have small- to mid-sized social media followings but they tend 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. Monitoring social media reviews that receive a lot of likes 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. For instance, bloggers often use video marketing to heighten overall engagement, build a brand that resonates, increase sharing and establish trust. (17)

On a final note, "With influencer marketing, likes, clicks, engagement and comments mean nothing if it's not generating revenue." (18) Data and technology must be used to assess audience response to branded content posts to assess impact.

Potential Tourism Themes/Clusters

As discussed in prior sections of this report, a dominant brand is needed to establish a distinct brand identity and image for HC and position it as a top-of-mind regional tourist destination. Opportunities for consolidated brand offerings that will connect to the master brand abound. The visual below demonstrates how brand architecture can be developed using a consistent design:

Several potential brand themes for HC emerged from the research and, ideally, no more than five or six should be touted from a marketing perspective. 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 HC. Suggestions include:

- Arts and culture
- Agro-tourism
- 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.), and it is recommended that thirty-second virtual tour videos for each 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 for this study indicated that 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 HC" or a monthly online calendar of events should be considered. In fact, as an avenue to elevating awareness about HC as a top-of-mind tourism destination, two regional events should be organized each year. Possibilities include an Octoberfest (unlike any other in the tri-state region) and either a Mayfest or "Welcome to Summer" celebration in June.

Target Market Strategies

Understanding life stage marketing and tracking segments as they transition generationally due to age, family status and major life events is 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." (19) 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. (19)

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

As an avenue to identifying viable market segments, notable findings (in italics) were gleaned from Phase 2:

- Visitors are mostly white, educated and married
- Family travel (with spouse and extended families) is common and attending a special event, for vacation or pleasure or visiting friends and/or relatives are the dominant reasons for traveling to HC
- *The majority of visitors are from New York and Philadelphia*, including counties up and down the I-95 corridor
- *Almost all visitors travel to HC by car* for the day and *most are repeat customers*
- *Millennials spend the most*, on average, followed by Generation X (yet *Boomers are the most dominant visitor* followed by Generation X, Millennials and the Silent Generation)
- *Overnight guests account for about 25% of travelers* and *Young Families and Moderate Families spend the most on lodging* (yet *Millennials spend the most overall* – may be due to length of stay)
- *The most significant life stage segment is Affluent Mature followed by Affluent Families*, Maturing and Free, and Young Families
- *About 20% travel with parties of 5 or more* which is almost double the NJ statistic
- *The Silent Generation has the highest average party size* (6) followed by Maturing and Free (4), Young Families (3-4) and Millennials (3); Boomers had the smallest party size (2-3)
- *About half of visitors travel with their spouse, children and other family members*
- *Young Families spend more on food and entertainment*
- *Nearly all visitors are satisfied with HC* (above the NJ statistic), a *vast majority indicated they would likely return* and a *vast majority would recommend HC* (well above the NJ statistic)
- The most heavily visited municipalities include Frenchtown, Milford, Lambertville, Readington, Flemington and Clinton Town

It is apparent that HC is appealing to a multitude of market segments who visit for different reasons and have varied spending patterns and preferences. The four primary generations are Boomers, Millennials, Generation X 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 3-6.

On-site interviews with business owners indicated that Millennials are an untapped market possibly because they rely so heavily on technology to research and commit to a destination. They often travel with groups of friends and their lodging preference is Airbnb or great

outdoors excursions. They also gravitate towards unique experiences and given the vast number of options in the region, it is realistic that they would return regularly provided they are informed through promotional methods.

Although the data indicates Millennials spend the most, Boomers are the most frequent visitors. This is an important statistic because although Boomers comprise a third of the population, it is a well-known fact that they account for 50% of all discretionary spending. Given their Affluent Mature life stage and income, they are a ripe market for upscale dining, shopping sprees, winery excursions and extended stays.

Establishing an over-arching tourism brand that will heighten awareness for HC is the priority. Then separate packages and programs can be developed to attract the various market segments. Given the overlapping nature of the groups, HC should strive to establish loyalty to the destination at an early life stage similar to the Disney model. 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.

Analytics and Market Research

Utilizing data in a systematic manner will allow HC to better understand visitors, market to the appropriate geographic areas and create destination packages that will increase frequency and length of stays. Tourism analytics is an important tool and the four metrics used to measure DMO success include:

1. The destination experience
2. Consumer engagement
3. Operator effectiveness
4. Corporate transformation (9)

The first two, in particular, can be assessed through mobile apps and e-mail. If visitors use their app for purchasing a ticket to an event, reserving lodging, making a restaurant reservation, etc. then their activities can be tracked. Predictive analytics can be used to personalize the guest experience and determine value-adds. Also, a 2-3 question survey (that rotates different questions) can be sent immediately following a visit to gain additional insights about how to improve the customer experience. Eventually, algorithms can be developed to prompt return visits and alert users about upcoming events.

Recommendations

Several recommendations were made throughout this report and they are highlighted below:

1. An umbrella brand strategy is necessary to project a solid image, establish a uniform identity and position HC 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 HC's status as a viable competitor in the destination space.

4. A stellar social media program, remarkable advertising and elegant collateral materials will reinforce the branding effort.

5. All internal stakeholders must be wedded to the comprehensive branding initiative in order for it to succeed. All individual marketing activities must be subsumed under the HC brand.

6. HC has an abundance of 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.

7. The spectacular brand assets listed on p. 14 should be leveraged extensively because they are points of difference that cannot be replicated by a competitor.

8. 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.

9. Potential brand themes include arts and culture, agro-tourism, 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 accompanied by an app.

10. Annual and seasonal events should be heavily promoted.

11. Two regional events should be organized each year to draw large crowds to the region. Possibilities include an Octoberfest and a "Welcome to Summer" celebration.

12. 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.

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

Conclusion and Next Steps

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 levels about the destination's many offerings are low. An umbrella brand will establish an image/identity, elevate awareness and position the region as a viable county escape destination.

Immediate next steps include design and communication. Detailed proposals are included in Appendices B and C. Eventually, the services of an app developer and analytics expert should also be secured.

References

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(2) Phase 2

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(20) https://stampdestinations.com/insights/life-stage-marketing/

Appendix A: SWOT Analysis

<u>Strengths</u>

- Long-standing and complementary support of two DMOs (Hunterdon County Chamber of Commerce and the Delaware River Towns Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Bureau), the Hunterdon County Economic Development Commission, Hunterdon County Board of Chosen Freeholders, and local government officials in 26 municipalities (1)
- Recognition that fairly recent formation of a dedicated Economic Development Commission was necessary to unify and position HC as a tourist destination from a macro perspective
- Tremendous sense of small-town community insofar as HC businesses take great pride in delivering an exceptional customer experience as well as supporting each other's businesses (customer referrals, merchandise placement in adjacent businesses) (13)
- Brand heritage, authenticity and integrity of many HC offerings – pillars delivering a brand promise and establishing loyal customer relationships
- Plethora of brand assets that would appeal to a multitude of target markets
- Brand storytelling opportunities abound (e.g., Revolutionary War sites, Red Mill Museum, Ironbound, Stockton Market, Milford Alive, ArtYard, etc.)
- Many experiential value proposition possibilities – may include foodie-related communal gatherings, a craft beer garden, chef's table dining, etc.

<u>Weaknesses</u>

- No umbrella brand strategy which has resulted in low awareness
- Non-existence of a DMO that focuses solely on promoting travel and tourism for HC
- Lack of a distinctive brand identity that defines the tourism region relative to competitors
- Brand assets/touch points have not been consolidated under a dominant brand into a consistent strategy – offerings are not bundled thematically
- Towns and businesses in HC engage in separate marketing programs
- Although a multitude of unique offerings exist, they are not bundled or promoted under an umbrella brand
- Inadequate lodging facilities and room capacity – lodging is not available in every town
- Premium pricing for most HC lodging facilities
- HC as a region lacks a high-tech, high-touch experience
- HC needs to leverage the hospitableness achieved through the human factor – friendly, warm, helpful business owners and employees (internal branding consideration)
- Touchpoints for the guest experience journey exist for towns and independent businesses but not for HC as a destination – branding and technology can remedy
- Data is not being gathered and evaluated on a regular basis – predictive analytics are essential for personalizing the guest experience and determining value-adds

- The Stockton Inn, with roots to George Washington, has been empty for 2 years

Opportunities

- Steady national growth in tourism industry from 2013-17, totaling over $1.6T in 2017 (1)
- Visitors to NJ spent over $44B in 2016 statewide representing a 2.6% increase over 2015 (1)
- Affordability of travel expenditures to Hunterdon County (26% v. 40% nationally) increases opportunity for additional visitor spending in other sectors of the local tourism industry (1)
- Historic roots, majestic beauty and small-town charm – HC gems abound
- Unique brand assets like the Red Mill, Ironbound, ArtYard, The Stockton Market, etc.
- Well-known towns including Lambertville, Clinton, Frenchtown and the Delaware River Towns are major draws
- Lambertville, Frenchtown and West Amwell have a lower total number of rooms but significance is that they are historical – also complement boutique shopping areas in respective municipalities (1)
- Consider developing home-sharing properties that mirror the Airbnb model
- Partner with Airbnb hosts to offset limited lodging and appeal to specific markets - Millennials historically comprise about 60% of all guests who have booked on Airbnb (4)
- Develop a platform-based business model that is seamless and relies on an established ecosystem (e.g., apps)
- Appeal to a younger generation of travelers by infusing technology and amenities – they are foodies and adventuresome
- Cater to demographics (e.g., Millennials) that seek instant gratification amenities and experiences
- Tap into the travel trend "where work, play, and life blend into one seamless mosaic" (3)
- Ambitious lobbying effort of the American Hotel & Lodging Association to impose taxes and regulations on Airbnb beginning in 2016 (4)

Threats

- Direct country escape competitors including Bucks County and the Hudson Valley
- Buy-in among all 26 municipalities and respective constituencies of a unified tourism brand program for HC
- Inability to attract a younger generation to the area to live and raise a family due, in part, to lack of industry and real estate prices
- School enrollments are shrinking
- Large (paper mill) and small (bank, bakery) businesses closing
- Low residential population (125,000) - many second home owners impacts vitality
- Significant disruption of the lodging industry due to Airbnb – 100% growth year over year since its inception in 2008 in 10 key hotel markets (3)

- Hotels lost approximately $450M in direct revenues annually to Airbnb (4)
- Airbnb is typically cheaper than a regional hotel's average daily rate (6-17% less) (4)
- Airbnb has shifted the traditional [travel] experience economy to include a sharing lifestyle and sense of community (3)
- Airbnb's wide array of homes and locations facilitates micro-segmentation and greater personalization – "perfect match" between guest and host (3)
- The recent introduction of Airbnb Plus, appealing to the leisure family market, the business traveler and the upscale traveler (3)
- 50% of Airbnb traffic is received through mobile devices (4)

estimate

July 19, 2019

Jennifer Barr
Stockton University
3430 Atlantic Avenue
Atlantic City, NJ 08401

HUNTERDON COUNTY TOURISM INITIATIVE MARKETING PLAN

OVERALL BRANDING

Logo and Tag line   **$3,500.00 - 5,000.00**
- Includes overall designs, research and copywriting

Ad Campaign   **$5,000.00 - 7,500.00**
- Includes (3) Ads: research, copywriting, testimonials, design
- Not Included: photography, illustration, production of ads (depends on each publications)

Brochure   **$5,000.00 - 8,000.00**
- 20 pages includes, mission and vision, arts and culture, activities, lodging, etc.
- Includes: research, copywriting, design, production
- Not Included: photography, illustrations or printing

Digital Newsletter   **$4,500.00**
- Develop overall masthead and newsletter (4 - 8 pgs) incorporating various activities, seasonal events, etc
- Includes: research, copywriting, design, production
- Not included is photography, illustrations or printing
- Posted to the website as a pdf and send out as a email blast

Email Blasts   **$4,200.00**
- Monthly email blasts with various topics, etc (6 recommended)
- Includes: research, copywriting, design, execution

Additional Items
- Social Media
- Care Package including some of the materials above and some novelty items
- Signage/Billboard Advertising
- Videos

TOTAL ESTIMATED   **$22,200.00 - 29,200.00**

TERMS

Two sets of client alterations included and additional client revisions shall be billed separately. Shipping are additional charges beyond the amount of this scope of services. All works created for the client become the client's sole property upon payment of monies due. Terms are due upon receipt.

50% DEPOSIT DUE UPON PROJECT TO START

Thank you for your consideration.

Proposed Social Media Plan for Hunterdon County Tourism Initiative
Hunterdon County, New Jersey, Chamber of Commerce
July 31, 2019

Prepared by Amy Barnett, amyjbarnett.communicate@gmail.com; 215-290-9916 cell; 215-348-1259 office

Goals:

Because Hunterdon County is initiating a comprehensive tourism marketing campaign for the first time, social media efforts for this project will focus on the first stage of a customer's journey: awareness. This campaign aims to promote Hunterdon's tourism brand and increase awareness of Hunterdon County as a destination to visit, dine, stay, shop, enjoy and revisit.

Term of social media campaign: 1 year

- Six weeks planning, preparation, content development and social media channel creation for campaign launch
- 46 weeks campaign duration

Recommended basic tactics and schedule:

Given the Chamber's budget constraints, this plan prioritizes basic tactics. Options for expanding the campaign beyond basic tactics appear in the section, "Recommended stage two tactics." Stage two tactics focus on the second stage of a customer's journey: engagement. As audiences become aware of the Hunterdon tourism brand, phase two tactics learn about their engagement with the brand and seek to boost positive engagement.

Preparation phase:

1. **Develop content strategy:** Working with Chamber of Commerce, create a content plan that promotes the County's tourism branding and assets – dining, outdoor recreation, shopping, special events, etc. – across social media platforms at optimum times to desired audiences (i.e. concentrate outdoor recreation on the river during warm months; promote balloon festival before and during event, and so on).
2. **Develop content schedule**: Create a schedule that guides release of all content across social media platforms for the duration of the project.
3. **Create content**: Develop content copy and graphics for review, approval and scheduling.
4. **Create branded social media channels:** Create branded accounts and account preferences for Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Implementation phase:

5. **Post on Facebook (FB):** Utilize branded FB page to post relevant content, create relevant public FB events. Identify and utilize share opportunities offered by Frenchtown, Lambertville and other Hunterdon town FB pages; leverage user-generated content. (Post once weekly, 46 total posts, repost/share organizational and user-generated content as identified)
6. **Post on Twitter:** Utilize branded Twitter feed to post relevant content, create tourism-specific hashtags, identify relevant retweets offered by Frenchtown, Lambertville and other Hunterdon town Twitter feeds, leverage user-

generated content. (Post once weekly, 46 total posts, retweet organizational and user-generated content as identified)

7. **Post on Instagram:** Utilize branded Instagram feed to post relevant content, create associated hashtags, post events, initiate location tagging, identify regram opportunities offered by Frenchtown, Lambertville and other Hunterdon town Instagram feeds; leverage user-generated content. (Post once weekly, 46 total posts, regram organizational and user-generated content as identified)

8. **Post on TripAdvisor:** Create typical destination marketing posts such as Top things to do in Hunterdon County, Top places to dine in Hunterdon County, Top outdoor activities, top events during the year, celebrating the holidays, Top 10 historic happenings, etc. (10 posts total, one dropping every 6-7 weeks)

9. **Monitor and report social media results:** Measure mentions, shares, links and impressions; track audience growth rate; measure post reach (how many people see a post after it goes live) and potential reach (number of people who could see a post during a reporting period). Because this type of monitoring can be time-consuming and inaccurate as an ad hoc effort, consider purchase of social media monitoring tool to automate this process and conserve level of effort. (3 reports; reporting at 16 weeks, 34 weeks, 52 weeks)

Budget:

Development phase: $4250 total fee
Implementation phase: $1150 per month
Additional hours beyond the scope of this plan will be billed at $85/hour.

Photographs purchases, graphics purchases, influencer payments and other incidental costs are not included and will be billed at cost plus a standard 15% agency fee. All project-related travel will be billed at cost. Additional tools such as software for measuring social media impact will be billed at cost and owned by Hunterdon County.

Recommended stage two tactics:

1. **Expand FB efforts:** Create livestreams for events, host visitor contests and/or travel giveaways, introduce programs for garnering shares and likes.

2. **Expand efforts on Twitter, Instagram and other social media channels as indicated:** Introduce programs for garnering shares and likes; identify influencers and form partnerships to promote Hunterdon County; identify and participate in relevant travel twitter chats.

3. **Evaluate emerging TripAdvisor opportunities:** As this platform continues its relatively recent social media expansion, identify new opportunities to engage audiences.

4. **Create a branded LinkedIn channel:** Because this social network works well for drawing business visitors, Hunterdon County may wish to consider whether appealing to the business travel audience is applicable.

5. **Create a branded Snapchat channel:** The channel's Snap Stories option may support asset, event and holiday promotion in the County for visitors in the 20-40-year-old demographics.

6. **Create Hunterdon stories:** Create content that highlights stories of special people taking part in special experiences in Hunterdon County: firsts, edible treasures, artistic endeavors, recreational highlights, historic interest. Creating this content requires the services of writers, photographers and editors.

7. **Consider creating Pinterest boards:** Create boards such as DineinHunterdonCounty, StayinHunterdonCounty, etc. where visitors can pin experiences and notable items in and from Hunterdon County.

Considerations:

- Successful social media campaigns for destination marketing require a well-stocked library of destination photographs, images and if possible, video, to create a very visually appealing social media interface. All efforts

will be made to utilize the County's existing image library to reduce costs but if the library is small, graphics costs may be substantial.

- Social media campaigns benefit greatly from a modern, functional, branded website that acts as a dedicated home for visitors to submit inquiries, discover more information (both on the site and linked to the site) and reinforce their emerging positive image of Hunterdon County as a destination.

- The research initiative documentation indicates that tourism marketing funding is a challenge for Hunterdon County. Following further discussions about priorities, tactic choices, desired posting frequency and available resources, this plan can be revised to suit.