



salem & mid-willamette valley COVID-19 Recovery Plan

May 2020

"We should never let a good crisis go to waste." Winston Churchill

introduction

Tourism marketing in a world following the COVID-19 pandemic will require Travel Salem to rethink how to reach visitors in a new way. Attitudes toward travel have changed. Financial considerations are different. Communication and interpersonal contact have been altered.

According to Resonance Consultancy, a world-wide research, strategy, branding and marketing firm, Travel will rebound in stages. Essential travel will lead to increased local and regional travel, broader domestic travel, international leisure travel, and finally, large events and conventions. Each destination will rebound at different rates depending on geography, infection rates, health policies, and governance.

Regardless of the recovery curve, Travel Salem will go through three distinct phases of marketing and management changes. Each stage offers unique challenges and opportunities that will help the region, hotels and attractions weather the path to recovery.

recovery phases:

1. Pre-Recovery

Before travel begins to slowly restart, this is the period where preparing, developing strategies and creating game plans is critical. Travel Salem will rework target audiences and messaging, clean house with digital assets, and align marketing and management operations for the short and near term.

2. Early Recovery

When confidence builds, restrictions are slowly lifted, and wanderlust starts to creep in. This period is when Travel Salem will begin to welcome local and regional visitors back again and prepare destination marketing and management for a fuller recovery.

3. Late Recovery

As wide-spread treatments or vaccines become available, this period marks a return to more traditional levels of travel and tourism. Travel Salem will be both defining and embracing the new normal of travel with revised operations and refined marketing and messaging for audiences with new sets of expectations.

the plan

Phase 1: Pre-Recovery

Marketing

Focus on brand awareness, strategic planning, marketing and overall assistance to local businesses and residents

BRAND

Take stock of brand, marketing strategies, performance metrics and tighten target audience and messaging tactics.

Tasks

- Review TravelSalem.com, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (social media), blogs and advertising messaging
- Utilize free SEO analysis tools (check for zombie pages, ineffective links and analyze performance through Google Analytics)
- Update links, images & content

STRATEGY ALIGNMENT

Do not blast forward with scheduled campaigns. Consumer behavior has changed and adjust messaging to the new reality.

Tasks

- Review target audiences and develop specific messaging for each
- Develop appropriate messaging for each channel (FB more story focused including blogs; Instagram more video & photo focused); be friendly, informative and sensitive

PREPARE & ORGANIZE

Keep the lights on - Do not let destination go completely dark! Audiences will change, patterns of spend will change, some activities will be more desired than in the past (e.g. uncrowded spaces, rural experiences).

Tasks

- Start a "Corona Watch" file in Basecamp to house all COVID-19 related projects
- Create an inventory of research & trends to assist with planning and communicating to the industry (e.g. Oregon's phased opening and guidelines; visitor sentiment, domestic & international travel trends; consumer trip planning; and touchless technology)
- Sector outreach updates (e.g. Board, Cultural Heritage, lodging, M/P counties)
 - Reached out to cultural heritage sector and followed up with them regarding virtual tours, research, 360 video and visitor travel patterns.
 - Reached out to all Marion and Polk counties Chambers of Commerce and tourism partners; will share Recovery Plan
- Created a Miss You Already campaign and encouraged stakeholders to use the slogan and visual

- Refine content strategy to focus on inspiration, develop visual content (e.g. 360 video), and create Virtual Visitors Center
- Focus on inspiration (e.g. scenic, beauty, “zen moments”) and calm messaging
- Pause or cancel all outbound marketing since visitation from outside the area is not allowed
- Review messaging diligently and ensure COVID sensitivity and appropriate phase guidelines are followed
- Visitors Center is closed but all visitor inquiries are fulfilled and calls returned
- Pause the TravelSalem.com events calendar since events are on hold until future reopening phases
- Create temporary content plan that can evolve quickly to ever changing consumer data and sentiment
- Create an editor’s note to add to all social posts that clearly states we are following guidelines and travel when safe to do so
- Develop & implement National Tourism Month plan– focus on the #SpiritofTravel and leverage the heightened awareness of the value of tourism as a result of the crisis (e.g. proclamation, Zoom backgrounds)
- Track all business lost and impacted by COVID-19 (e.g. events canceled, meetings/conferences canceled)
- Track year-over-year changes in Travel Salem website and social media statistics to determine the impact of COVID; evaluate content campaigns and what content is resonating with consumers

MESSAGING & CONTENT

Tasks

- Collect stories, images, social posts, videos and anecdotes from the community to showcase how people worked together during the crisis
- Create a Salem & the Mid-Willamette Valley Anthem video that shows appreciation and tribute to the indomitable spirit and strength of the community
 - Write heartfelt script as a “love letter” to community
 - Create and implement a video distribution plan to ensure that a wide range of businesses, organizations and stakeholders see the video and post it on their channels
- Create a database of stories to convey the brand and sense of place
- Highlight authentic experiences in social media and online that showcase the natural area and uncrowded locations

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Tasks

- Improve communications and create ways for residents to engage with Travel Salem. Include local voices to influence destination development and marketing initiatives. What is the resident sentiment regarding visitors coming to the area?

- Distribute a visitor readiness survey, Anthem video, and re-opening guidelines
- Create messaging targeting local residents focusing on generating a greater appreciation of Salem; our city may not have changed but the way residents experience it definitely has
- Start a social campaign inviting people to share their experience with a unique tag (e.g. #TravelLocal, #SameButDifferent, #SalemStrongTravelOn)

FUTURE-FOCUSED SALES EFFORTS

Future meeting delegates and sports participants and spectators may be more interested in attending meetings and sporting events in smaller destinations with less crowds. There will be new contract clauses and caveats, but deals can still be signed.

Tasks

- Create meeting/event planner communication strategy to reaffirm that our destination is ready to book business for future periods
- Pivot sales efforts to communicate how Salem is equipped and prepared to host groups (e.g. hygiene, distancing, safety)
- Work with venues to develop flexibility of terms (cancellation policies, payment schedules)

Phase 1: Pre-Recovery

Management

RESOURCES

Tasks

- Create a COVID-19 Resources landing page on TravelSalem.com that assists the community with helpful resources and informs visitors as to the precautions the destination is taking to ensure their safety
- CARES Act Relief funding options, guidelines, policies, workforce
- Local business information (what is being offered – curbside pickup, etc.)
- Health and safety resources (e.g. Oregon Health Authority, impacts/updates)
- Travel information & alerts (e.g. CDC travel information, re-opening best practices)

INDUSTRY AND BUSINESS ADVOCACY

Clear, concise and frequent communications need to be heightened during a crisis to ensure all stakeholders are informed regarding trends, data, funding options, messaging and strategy.

Tasks

- Communicate at a hyper-frequency with all funders and stakeholders (e.g. operations, research, strategy)
- Survey lodging partners monthly to collect occupancy information to determine trends and forecast budgets

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP AND BUSINESS CONTINUITY

Information sharing between diverse business sectors regarding reopening guidelines, preparedness and a variety of topics is vital to ensuring continuity in service and guest experience and expectations. The tourism industry is leading the way for other businesses in regard to visitor safety.

Tasks

- Create an e-Communication called “Leveling Up – A COVID Business Update” to keep businesses apprised of reopening phases and to share information (e.g. visitor & employee behaviors, cleanliness procedures, re-engineering facilities [restaurants, hotels, meeting sites], individual protocols)
- Develop stakeholder videos that illustrate their preparedness for reopening to build consumer confidence
- Launch the Marketing Toolkit that includes marketing plan development, public relations templates, grant writing tips, social media best practices and more; the Toolkit was in development before COVID and the launch will be timely to assist businesses with recovery

MEDIUM AND LONG-TERM MANAGEMENT PLANS

Travel Salem executes a thoughtful approach to planning. However, there is no road map for COVID so there needs to be plans created for a variety of “realities” of what might happen in the future. Scenario planning helps us prepare for opportunities and reduces risk.

Tasks

- Create multiple scenario plans based on re-opening phases
- Create content plans that are flexible and can respond to changes in guidelines to ensure up-to-date messaging

Phase 2: Early Recovery

With more businesses open and non-essential travel allowed, this phase will primarily focus on local and regional travel and start to broaden the circle of outreach.

Early recovery will be underway when:

- Government restrictions are lifted
- Increase in organic web traffic – sustained 10-20% increases
- Increase in unique visitors, page views, duration on website
- Increase in social media engagement – reposts & comments

Phase 2: Early Recovery

Marketing

Make sure communications are tailored to the audience. We can assume that (outside of essential business travel) trips will be shorter, closer to home and will avoid large crowds. Repeat visitors are themes to prepare for.

Tasks

- Collect research to determine traveler sentiment

- What is the expectation of the traveler versus the reality of the destination's products?
 - What is open and ready to accept visitors?
- Open the Visitors Center for curbside assistance
- Contact canceled groups and invite back & offer assistance rebooking
- Target local & regional visitors from the last five years; send link to Virtual Visitors Center
 - Send a personalized email welcoming them back
 - Focus on safety, accessibility and being a trusted destination
 - Develop short stay itineraries or small incentives
 - Use www.Arrivalist.com/daily-travel-index/ to monitor travel patterns
- Work with partner organizations to align messaging (e.g. SEDCOR, Chamber, real estate) to maximize reach

TRAVELER EXPECTATIONS

As travel resumes all marketing should align with audiences and messaging should address the realities of Salem as well as the expectations of the traveler.

Tasks

- Work with regions to ensure consistent and welcoming messaging to reassure travelers that the destination is ready to welcome them back (websites, social media, press materials, hashtag #TravelStrongSalem to signal a collective openness)
- Add voicemail message sharing favorite location/event (e.g. away from desk in a meeting or at the World Beat Festival)

INCENTIVIZE - DON'T CANNIBALIZE

Don't drop prices or run massive sales – this is not a sustainable strategy. Incentives are more effective.

Tasks

- Collaborate on promotions and packages (hotel & restaurant, hotel & yoga class, tours with a behind-the-scenes offering, limited capacity venues, winery tour and museum)
- Create short itineraries (3-4 stops) along with longer stay itineraries to attract day & overnight visitors

TARGETED ADS

Tasks

- Target advertising and social media campaigns to drive markets (within 50-200 miles)
- Run A/B campaigns to determine best results of targeted ads
- Hone messaging to fit each target with reassuring language that destination can deliver
- Create a “key word” campaign focusing on specific locations and interests

INFLUENCERS & BLOGGERS

Tasks

- Create an influencer program for bloggers, Instagrammers, travel reviewers and proud locals as a way to increase a destination's voice; shared hashtag; get others to share your message
- Have a local influencer adopt a business and pledge support for the business of their choice

THEMATIC CAMPAIGNS

There will be pent-up demand for travel, and it will drive early recovery trips.

Tasks

- Create campaigns that entice visitors with the "next best thing"; create "Discover the World Inside Salem" packaged theme, #DiscoverSalem (e.g. Can't go to Germany ... Go to Oktoberfest; Can't go to Italy ... Check out our wine region)
- Create itineraries focused on isolation travel (e.g. car camping, hikes, cycling, campfire stories)

LAUNCH NEW CONTENT

Tasks

- Stories, videos, images, itineraries with messaging reflecting opening phases
- Continue long-lead story pitches to ensure the media pipeline is full of Salem & MWV stories

Phase 2: Early Recovery

Management

Tasks

- Create an emergency plan for visitors who may get sick in destination
 - How will they get home if they get sick?
 - Where can they stay?
 - What medical facilities are ready to assist them?
 - What are we doing to deliver a healthy visit? Be ready with answers
 - Share emergency plan with community and region

Phase 3: Late Recovery

It may seem a distant dream, but the industry will recover. The human desire to explore and travel will be as strong as it ever was. But it will take time. Done correctly, our destination can emerge even stronger.

REASSESS AND RESPOND

Tasks

- Assess the resurgence of visitors.
Which audiences returned? What was the traveler behavior? Which venues struggled and which succeeded? What messaging worked? Which incentive/campaign worked?

- Evaluate and confirm successes

RESET EXPECTATIONS

Understand the impact of macro and micro trends. Create future plans and consider strategies and tactics in the new normal post-pandemic era.

Tasks

- Implement survey to determine:
 - How expectations of the traveler have changed
 - Will a visitor's interaction with a real person be a selling point as a upper level or luxury experience?

CONSIDERATIONS

Strategies and SWOT

- Did a previous weakness become an opportunity? (Does a small community become more appealing to a metro traveler?)
- Did a traditional strength become a risk?
- Does your brand hold up in this post-COVID world?
- Small venues an asset (Are intimate venues with less crowds more appealing?)
- Curated tours (Do visitors want a more curated experience? Reservations for tours.)
- Health care capacity an asset
- Boutique shopping vs. mall experience
- Competitive advantage analysis

INCREASED DIGITAL

Pre, during and post trip digital experiences to enhance their real-world visit will have an upper hand in gaining mindshare and visitors.

UNDERSTANDING FUTURE TRAVELERS

By 2026, Gen Z will be the largest group of travelers. This represents approximately 80% of the U.S. and a generation that has never been without the Internet, social media or mobile phones. Digital natives who've come through a pandemic will represent a large percentage of travel and a destinations ability to understand and create compelling products for this audience is crucial.

MARKETING TO POST-PANDEMIC TRENDS

Safety will remain a top-traveler criterion but will morph to include touchable surface cleanliness, crowd control, social distancing, public space hygiene, lodging sanitation, etc. Less crowded spaces. Curated, custom and limited-edition experiences will be desired. The appreciation for "slow and small" in dining, in shopping and in attractions will increase.

FUTURE OF TRAVEL TECHNOLOGY

Routing optimization, dynamic pricing, virtual concierge. Hotel check ins, touch-free payment options, health screenings.

Late Recovery Management

A Universal Brand – there has been a needless separation between the tourism brand, the economic development brand, the investment promotion brand and the talent attraction brand. Those days are over. Going forward the new normal requires consolidation, cooperation and cohesion of brands. All for one and one for all with the community being the beneficiary.

Task

- Create joint messaging from Travel Salem, SEDCOR & Chamber to ensure consistency and collaboration

CAPACITY PLANNING

It is important to know your limits regarding crowds and capacity.

- How many visitors can your venue accommodate adhering to social distancing?
- What is the venue's capacity? How do you enforce the capacity limit? How are you monitoring social distancing and mandatory mask wearing?

Questions

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Credit: Resonance Consultancy
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