

Designing and Marketing Low Season Tourism Experiences

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Content Page

This manual is organised in six key messages:

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Products, make way for experiences.

Products are so yesterday, and customers want to engage with your offering with all their senses.

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Different seasons, different markets.

You will need to adapt your offer to different types of customer to balance changes in demand.

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There's something special about your place in the low season.

We often take for granted what's on our doorsteps, so let's look at your resources with fresh eyes and see how you can turn them into something special.

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Let's design innovative experiences.

You will need to create experiences that are great, even when it's cold, wet, and dark early. Co-create experiences with nearby partners and use events to drive demand.

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Time for marketing and storytelling.

New experiences require a lot of marketing effort, but if they are truly innovative and you've communicated them well, consumers will share the messages for you.

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Be clear what benefits you expect.

Visualising the results you want to achieve will help you have the determination you need to make changes.

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Time for marketing and storytelling.



Journalists and social media influencers seek novelty and you are likely to get public media coverage opportunities in the winter that would not be available in the crowded summer market.

Customers want to enjoy vacations during the winter season but they don't know about your new experiences. Getting known in the market requires a lot of marketing effort and you may need new skills and partnerships.

Learn how to story tell and how to use social media, and consumers themselves will share the message for you.

The good news is, truly innovative experiences that are communicated well are likely to go viral. There are few competing experiences in low season, which means you have a better chance to stand out and be seen. Journalists and social media influencers seek novelty and you are likely to get public media coverage opportunities in the winter that would not be available in the crowded summer market.

All the marketing skills you experiment with this winter will be second nature to you for your next high-season, when you will be too busy to learn new tricks.



Invest in low season marketing resources.

You will need to work harder to attract winter, rather than summer, customers but the efforts will pay off all year round.



Search online for “ten things to do in winter in my area”, or “winter wedding venues”, or “winter days out”, or the equivalent for whatever you are offering. Understand what those suppliers of experiences do that is different to your offering, and figure out how you can pitch for your business to be included.

Most tourism businesses dislike having to market themselves and avoid spending much time doing so. No wonder they struggle to get customers in low season.

Identify communication channels.

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Identify online publications in need of content.

Travel blogs and magazines need content so if you have a unique experience, invite journalists to experience your services and pitch a story to them, in the hope they will write about you. It's a lot harder to get featured in high season, when there is more competition, than in winter when these magazines have fewer options available.

Enjoy winter photography.

Sadly, most businesses have a very poor collection of photographs to promote themselves and they hardly ever include winter photos besides the odd snowy

landscape. Yet customers want to be able to picture themselves in the photography you use in your marketing efforts. Winter photography of cosy interiors and fireplaces, and beautiful landscape winter scenery can be compellingly evocative and inviting.

Update your website regularly.

Your website today needs to show what your business, and its surroundings, look like at the time that your customers expect to visit you. There is no point in showing pictures of people in t-shirts and gardens with flowers if you want customers to book for winter. The same can be said about the “things to do” that you offer: prepare website content that is season specific and rotate it throughout the year.

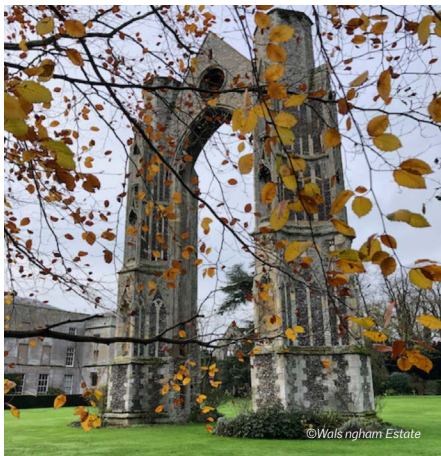
Market onsite to encourage repeat custom.

Produce a leaflet to give to visitors at the entrance or exit of your venue, saying “what's on this month” and, on the reverse side, “what's on next month”; this can prompt more repeat visits. A coffee table photo book showing your gardens throughout the year or photos on your walls showing beautiful winter landscapes near your property, can remind visitors that it's worth returning at different times.



We widen our appeal by harnessing social media trends to attract a new audience.

Elizabeth Meath Baker is the Director of Walsingham Estate Trading Ltd, responsible for public access to Walsingham Abbey, Norfolk (UK).



Our Tips:

Design your visitor experience to encourage people to spend more time, and money, by providing them with a number of “must do” activities. Encourage them to share photos of their experience.

What we do:

Instagram allows us to introduce our snowdrop walks to a new audience who are seeking instagrammable settings in which to take pictures, for example, of their children, partners or dogs.

How we do it:

The grounds in Walsingham Abbey are open in February for visitors to see the first flowers of the year, the snowdrops, against the historic backdrop of the ruined priory. Snowdrops multiply naturally, so we don't need to plant more bulbs. We have, however, planted some different varieties in specific areas over recent years to introduce more interest for those visitors who are particularly keen to spot different types. We are

developing a collection to showcase the snowdrop's amazing range, and we have designed the Abbey's gardens to provide snowdrop photo opportunities.

Walsingham is well known as a religious pilgrimage centre, so our snowdrop enthusiasts are a different market to our normal clientele who come in the pilgrimage season. We are extremely well known for our snowdrop walk and, to some extent, we are seeing the same people year after year who would not think to visit in summer. Snowdrops work well to attract social media attention and increase demand for days out, at a time of year when there are few leisure opportunities, compared to daffodils a few weeks later on, for example.

Snowdrop visitors primarily fall under the 'active retired' market segment, who want to treat themselves. They also tend to spend more as part of their day out than do our pilgrim visitors in summer who are more likely to be on a tight budget.

There are a number of cafes and two pubs in the village of Little Walsingham and the estate owns a farm shop, so the attraction of the snowdrop walks brings in secondary spend to both the estate and the wider village. Snowdrop bulbs are on sale in the farm shop. The walks also encourage more visitors to the Shirehall Museum, an eighteenth-century former courthouse that provides the entrance to the abbey's grounds



Harness the power of social media.

Create a social media plan and follow it systematically.



Most small firms do not dedicate enough hours to their marketing activities, which they fit around other tasks, particularly when it comes to social media. Rethink your approach and block out regular time to plan and deliver your marketing tasks.

Set yourself a target. Figure out what you want to achieve and why it matters to you.

Learn about your customers. Use social media analytics to learn more about the profile of your followers, so you

can rework your social media posts to meet their needs. Learn from your competitors. Identify 3-5 businesses similar to yours that are more successful in social media and learn what they do differently.

Learn what already works for you. What's different about the social media post that had the highest number of likes or shares, compared to your "average" post? Is it the time of day, the fact it has a better photo, the language you use, or that the content was funny rather than factual? Whatever it is, learn from it so your new posts will be more like it.

Each social media channel has a purpose. While Facebook and Instagram outrank all other channels in communication with customers, the purposes of YouTube or TikTok are very different, and you need to know what each channel can be used for.

Create a social media content calendar. Set up a posting schedule, for example with Hootsuite, so your posts are spaced out and they are released at the time of maximum engagement for your audience.

Set up social media competitions. Provide incentives to your customers to post about you, whether this is by offering them a free coffee per post (when they buy a cake), or run a competition of who gets the most likes on posts that you are tagged in (and then the prize needs to be larger).

Get professional help. Identify micro influencers that will want to test your services and invite them to honestly speak about you. While micro influencers with few followers may be happy to provide reviews for free in exchange for free use of your facilities, the people that are more established in social media will require a payment- you are not only buying their time, but also their endorsement.

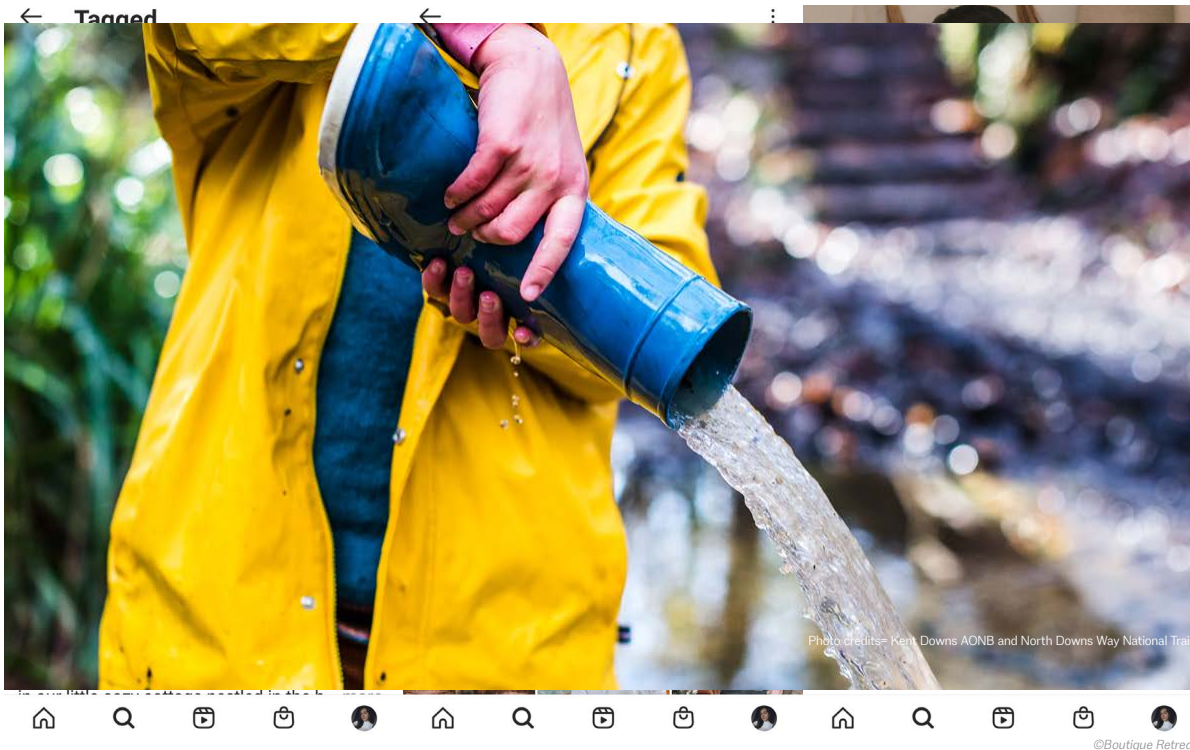


Identify micro influencers that will want to test your services and invite them to honestly speak about you.



We have a winter-themed Social Media Marketing campaign.

Boutique Retreats is a UK holiday letting agency with a wide-ranging portfolio of 150 unique properties of various styles.



Our Tips:

Strengthen audience engagement on social media through eye-catching photographs and collaborations with influencers

What we do:

We encourage low season bookings with special offers and the main way we promote these is through social media. We believe that an effective Social Media Marketing (SMM) strategy is crucial for maintaining customer flows all year round.

How we do it:

Our formula for successful social media marketing (SMM) is:
SMM=Photography + Affiliate Marketing

The Power of Photography

As our cottages are targeted at connoisseurs of beauty, visual images are of utmost importance to our clients and are the element that directly influences their buying behaviour. We bring together a team of professional photographers and SMM managers to develop a quality product. Knowing that in winter, people want to be inspired and have their emotions stimulated, we use emotive photography to encourage a connection with our properties. Pictures of cosy interiors and log fires on Instagram enhance peoples' desire to visit. We see their reactions in the comments they leave and in how many of our photographs are saved.

Affiliate Marketing

We reduce the effects of seasonality by investing in our affiliate program, partnering with influencers and brands. We encourage travel bloggers to become our affiliates and, in so doing, their followers become familiarised with our cottages. Affiliate Marketing can be barter-based: in case if we provide partners with a 'Boutique Retreat' experience for free, and in return they provide us with social media exposure. However, the more established influencers with a large number of followers will demand a fee.

Some of our affiliates are home decor companies; they provide us with their products to decorate our cottages for the festive period and, in return, we tag their brand on our social media.

The benefits of affiliate marketing can be tracked with links, product/account tags. Affiliate marketing generally gives your brand more exposure and leads to the exchange of followers than traditional forms of social media marketing.



Become a storyteller.

Connect and inspire so that your prospective customer feels something.



Storytelling uses a combination of techniques to generate a narrative around your products/services, to inspire your customers to purchase.

Storytelling is the art of communicating so that your customers care about you. You are creating an emotional empathy, which means they trust you because they find your message relatable.

Contrary to traditional marketing that focuses solely on features and benefits, and balances quality versus value and functionality versus luxury, experiential marketing acknowledges that customers are both rational and emotional beings.

Storytelling uses a combination of techniques to generate a narrative around your products/services, to inspire your customers to purchase. It is strongly embedded in the social and cultural context you are targeting. Thus, knowing your audience is the essential first step to increasing the effectiveness of your marketing campaigns.

Sensory experience: engage your audience with visual content such as pictures and videos. Vision accounts for more than 50% of purchase intention. Sounds, smells, taste, touch can also improve advertisement effectiveness.

Emotional experience: create emotion-inducing stimuli such as happiness (more shares), sadness (more clicks), fear/surprise (more loyalty), anger/disgust (viral content).

Problem-solving experience: engage your audience with creative thinking and make them curious about your offers.

Physical/virtual experience and lifestyles: focus on the virtual experience of interaction with both products and other individuals, since action-oriented advertisement communicates motivation and meaning.

Ideal self: embellish customers' appeals for self-improvement and their desired impressions of the social context, for example, through social media and influencers.

We bring autumn to life with colour-blind-friendly scenic viewers.

Commissioner Mark Ezell heads the Tennessee Department of Tourist Development (US).



Our Tips:

Be on the lookout for innovative technologies of the 21st century that can open up the experiences of your destination to people with disabilities. The return on investment could be the generation of completely new sources of demand extending into the off-peak tourism season.

What we do:

We have installed “colour-blind” (colour vision deficiency) viewfinders powered by EnChroma lens technology at 12 parks and scenic overlooks across the Tennessee State, in order to enable colour-blind visitors to fully experience the magnificent beauty of nature.

the state. The ground-breaking spectral lens technology is designed to enable people with colour vision deficiencies to see a broader range of clear, vibrant colours. This technology gave us a chance to reach a unique tourist audience and offer them a memorable, often first-in-their-lifetime, experience.

How we do it:

While people with normal colour vision see more than one million hues and colours, the 350 million people in the world with colour vision deficiency only see an estimated 10% of them. Among everything else, the magnificent explosion of autumnal colours appears either much less vibrant or completely indistinguishable for people with colour-blindness, depending on the type and severity of their condition.

The accompanying YouTube video from Tennessee’s official YouTube channel @ TNvacation has been watched more than 3.8 million times at the time of writing. Thus, not only does the video continue to showcase the incredible experience we have in store for our colour-blind tourists, but also it serves as an unprecedented general marketing awareness campaign for the stunning beauty of Tennessee during autumn seasons.

Using EnChroma technology, Tennessee installed 12 new viewfinders at scenic overlooks across





Involve your customers in your storytelling.

No one says it better than the people who have experienced it for themselves.

Customers trust other customers more than they trust you. Your marketing budget and reach can be multiplied if you empower your customers. But your customers won't just promote you because they like you, you need to think about what's in it for them. Why would they find your posts interesting and why would they tell others about it?

Create discussions, not just adverts. If the entire purpose of your business account is to push your product, you will have limited followers. Less than 50% of your content should be advertising, the rest can be promoting local activities or events, talking about things to do near you, highlighting seasonal events, showing support for local charities... all of which indirectly create a desire in people to visit you. And all of these posts are more likely to be shared or liked than any advert that you post.

Rather than trying to put yourself in your customers' shoes to create relevant content on your communication channels, provide them with a dedicated platform such as:

- A live Instagram feed with a hashtag of your creation.
- A blog with guest contributions.
- A participative digital campaign.
- A contest for the funniest videos, the most unusual pictures or the most beautiful images of your site/venue/area.

Encourage your customers to create user-generated content about their experiences at your property or destination. Use video and encourage your customers to do the same. Then use their posts to create conversations.

Reward your customers for providing content that shows you, or your local area, in a good light. Run the occasional competition where you reward those users that get the highest number of shares or likes. You can run a small competition for the best ten things to do in winter near you, or the ten best cakes, or the ten most picturesque places in autumn colours... all of which create traffic and show other customers that there are exciting things to do nearby.



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We co-create activities and social media campaigns.

Martin Reynolds and Alice He are responsible for the China Ready Initiative at Edinburgh Tourism Action Group (UK).

What we do:

As part of our “China Ready Initiative”, we collaborate with around 30 visitor economy businesses in Edinburgh to develop Chinese New Year (CNY) experiences. This increases the satisfaction and engagement of Chinese university students, raises awareness of the Chinese market amongst businesses and improves footfall in the low season.

How we do it:

Chinese New Year was a low-key event in the city of Edinburgh mainly delivered by, and for, the local Chinese community. We identified an opportunity to build on these activities, engaging non-Chinese residents and businesses at a traditionally quiet time of year. New Year changes with the lunar calendar but falls between 21 January and 20 February, with celebrations lasting up to 16 days.

We provide a toolkit of resources for businesses in the visitor economy including a website, online CNY briefing documents and webinars. We partner with the Confucius Institute at Heriot Watt University to bring together and promote a number of Chinese events under a festival-style banner. We encourage organisations to light up their buildings in red, to decorate their shop windows, to give red envelopes to customers and, generally, to learn how to welcome Chinese visitors.

Our activities are supported by a social media campaign that has substantial reach and acceptance both amongst



Chinese students and local residents. Students act as brand ambassadors, sharing their positive feelings on Weibo and WeChat. Edinburgh’s social media channels have been independently ranked “Best in Europe” on destination engagement (according to *Dragon Trail International*), despite having a low budget. Our success is largely due to the appetite for visitor activities in low season, both by residents who see this as an enjoyable addition to their cultural landscape and by Chinese students who feel more welcomed by the city.

Our Chinese New Year activity aims to celebrate the connections between the Scottish and Chinese cultures. In 2019, we celebrated Burns Night and CNY at the same time and, for 2020, we reinterpreted the Year of the Ox as the #YearoftheCoo, linking the campaign to the much-loved Highland Cow.



Our Tips:

Develop opportunities for user-generated content on social media that is authentic and driven by your target audience. This will work particularly well in winter, when there are fewer competing events in the calendar.



Task 5:

Adapt your marketing effort to the different value you gain from different customers. Use your time and resources smartly.

Let's assume that you are the type of business that has a customer database. How do you use it to make marketing decisions? Do you send the same message to everyone, with the same offer, irrespective of the value that customer has to you? If different customer groups have different needs, then surely your marketing needs to be targeted differently too.

Let's assume you can break down your database in the following way:

Group 1. Most valued customers. If you are a cafe or restaurant, they may come weekly. As an accommodation business, they may come two or three times per year. You get the gist.

Group 2. Regular customers.

Group 3. Occasional customers.

Group 4. Once in a lifetime customers.

Group 5. Enquiries that did not convert into customers.

Your marketing efforts need to be proportional to the value of that customer group and the message you send should be relevant to their last experience with you. Typically, with every group you want them to move up to the higher group, e.g., for those in Group 5, you would like them to buy for the first time (becoming a Group 4 customer) and you may need to offer them a discount to do so. With Group 4 customers, your aim is to get them to visit again (becoming a Group 3 customer) so you will need to tell them that your experience has improved or that there is more to do. And so on.

Try to show your appreciation for Group 1, and market to them sensitively and show that loyalty goes both ways. Rather than trying to get them to buy more from you per se, you can have a personalised and generous offer to encourage them to bring family and friends, or to stay for longer, or to spend more by packaging multiple services.

Your task is to identify which sustainable experiences you are willing to offer to each group to tempt them to book with you next time, based on the principle that the more valuable the group, the more you should be willing to spend to keep them.