

Everyone loves to network

More and more we are hearing that businesses really like to have an excuse to network. Feedback from the recent Discovery tours certainly supports this, attendees said "the tour provided a great platform to meet local businesses with the potential of working together" or to just have a "chat about the challenges that faces tourism generally". Lots of people said they were keen to work with others to improve their offering and were keen to work with their local tourism group to help develop what's on offer in their area generally. Some people took the opportunity to exchange contact details with the businesses or attractions visited and with those they met on the day too.

In these challenging trading times it's always a comfort to know that you are not the only person having to rethink the way you do things. It's not easy plucking new ideas out of thin air, sometimes we need a little help to get those grey cells working. Chatting with your peers is an excellent way to get new ideas or just feel you are not alone when things don't quite go the way you expected.

Pride & Passion is always on the hunt for new ideas and best practice. Recently at a Business Development session we stumbled upon a great way to use networking to help solve business problems. A handful of businesses were invited to the session who were wrestling with a gritty problem they were struggling to overcome. Most of the problems related directly to the 'credit crunch' and changing markets.

At the session there were people from all sectors, there was a great diversity of skills, and this is the key to successful problem solving: Very different views and perspectives are vital in helping solve problems.

So here's the challenge:

- Get a diverse group of people together
 - Find some volunteer businesses, who have a problem to overcome and are open minded about being challenged!
 - Create 'swat' teams made up of a cross section of skills. Include as many diverse backgrounds/skills as possible, retail, activities, transport, council, visitor attractions, accommodation providers etc.
 - Get the volunteer business to outline the problem, what they've done to overcome it so far.
 - Find out as much as possible; the 'swat' team should ask searching open questions to fully understand the challenge e.g. what have you done to find out what your staff think?
 - Brainstorm ways of solving the problem.
 - Take a break and go and listen in to the other groups and meet the other problem holders, you may be able to use ideas and suggestions from your own group to help solve problems in the other groups and vice versa.
 - Return to your groups, and formulate all the ideas into an action plan. Summarise the solutions on post it notes under headings – continue this/start that/stop doing whatever... .. And hey presto an instant action plan!
- It's not about the solution but how the solution was arrived at that is important i.e. utilising the diversity of minds.

Local Skill pool?

It has also occurred to us that in any one community there is a huge range of talent within local businesses and which is often kept hidden under the proverbial bushel.

Another idea we stumbled across recently and could be tried at any networking event is a 'skills swap' e.g. I can help optimise your website if you can give me some ideas on updating my décor. Maybe this is something you could try in your local tourism group.

Get everyone to write down on a postcard who they are, what company they are from, what their company does, what can they offer by way of support and what they need by way of help or support. This works best if there are many diverse business types and skills involved. Stick all the cards onto one wall. From reading the cards it will become clear where you can offer help, mark that with a post it note, stating what you can offer and who you are. Before you know it you will be armed with some helpful advice and solutions and an opportunity to continue working with a number of businesses.

Working in this way is great for building local contacts, interconnections within the community and helping everyone to progress but without money having to change hands in this tight economic climate.

If you like it's free consultancy, well not quite because hopefully you'll be offering something in return. What's more, these improvements will impact positively on the experience your customers have, and you won't be giving away any trade secrets.