

LEADERSHIP AND GOOD PRACTICE IN TOURISM GROUPS

Author's background

Elma McMenemy has been active in the tourism industry in North East Scotland for 30 years. During that time, she has worked in both the public and private sectors and has taken an active role in national initiatives. During 18 years working for the organisation which became Aberdeen & Grampian Tourist Board Elma was a member of, and observed, many different tourism groups. Pride & Passion are very fortunate to have Elma as a Board member.

Background – the Scottish Snowsports Marketing Group (SSMG)

The opening of Scotland's fifth ski area, Nevis Range, in 1989, together with the formation of the Ski Grampian consortium to promote skiing at Glenshee and The Lecht, were the catalysts which prompted the formation of SSMG. At that time, there was duplication and piecemeal promotion of the main Scottish skiing areas (Cairngorm, Glencoe, Nevis Range, The Lecht and Glenshee) but research pointed to the fact that what most customers wanted was information about all of Scotland's ski areas in one brochure.

In the mid-1990s a group was formally constituted with the sole purpose of promoting snow sports in the North of Scotland. The Group has endured and succeeded while similar consortia have folded, and although membership has changed over the years, the one constant is the membership of each of the five ski areas.

Current members are:

- The five ski (now called snowsports) areas: Cairngorm Mountain; Glencoe Mountain Resort; Glenshee, Lecht 2090 Ski & Multi-activity Centre; Nevis Range
- VisitScotland
- Snowsport Scotland (the sport's governing body)

The current part-time co-ordinator also works part-time for Snowsport Scotland, with a remit to develop the sport in the north of Scotland.

Why has SSMG succeeded?

In its formative years, SSMG attracted high-level participation from the ski areas (often at Director level) and the public sector. It has successfully adapted to change, attracted funding from a wide range of public bodies and financial contributions from the ski areas themselves. Although instigated by the public sector, it is now led, very strongly, by the industry.

Particular strengths are:

- Inclusion of all interested parties:
 - participation by all five ski areas (i.e. the entire industry)
 - hard work to ensure this continued following changes in ownership of some ski areas
 - active participation of tourist boards/VisitScotland representing a wide range of businesses (e.g. accommodation, places to eat) in the vicinity of the ski areas
- A realistic outlook:
 - financial contributions from the ski areas are directly linked to ability to pay (i.e. a formula based on numbers of customers – known as "skier days" is applied)
 - flexibility of payment deadlines should one or more areas have a poor winter season
- Agreed common goal:
 - To maximise the number of "skier days" (i.e. customers) at Scotland's snowsports areas
 - To focus totally on promoting the winter product, despite most areas now offering "summer" activities of one sort or another
- Ensuring that agreed joint activity goes ahead on schedule and regardless of individual priorities by:
 - Investing in a part-time co-ordinator (and not expecting the public sector to undertake co-ordination for them – it is recognised those days are long gone)
 - Allocation of staff time by larger ski areas so that staff can work on SSMG activities
- Adapting to change and embracing new opportunities:
 - Accepting that some smaller ski areas are unable to allocate staff/time to SSMG – the others just get on with the work, and consult by email (earlier by phone)
 - Forging links and collaborating with other related businesses (e.g. Xcape SNO!zone in Glasgow)
- Consumer research is given high priority, and drives the marketing activity
- Understanding of how SSMG & its product fit with national strategies:
 - Majoring on importance of off-season

- Accepting the timing of, for example, VisitScotland's marketing opportunities, which are geared at main-season, rather than winter promotion, and working around this
- Importance of winter jobs in retaining population in some areas

Why do some groups and consortia fail?

In my experience, the most common weaknesses which contribute towards failure include:

- Fear of working with competitors, which can lead to:
 - "holding back" – not being prepared to share any market/customer information
 - exclusion of some interests, very often larger, successful businesses (or towns) which are seen as a threat by those already in the group
- Failure to agree a common goal/purpose for the group
- Trying to keep all joint activities within the group, rather than seek/employ outside help, resulting in:
 - over-reliance on one or more (initially, usually enthusiastic) group member(s)
 - group's work is undertaken by one or a few individuals, who become overworked/disillusioned
 - the group becomes only a talking shop without anyone to carry forward the work
 - all group members become disillusioned, stop attending meetings/answering emails, or delegate to staff who are out of their depth or level of authority
- Over-reliance on VisitScotland/other public body for co-ordination/admin, although it can be very difficult if this support is suddenly withdrawn with little warning
- Failure to understand the visitor/customer, including:
 - offering only what the group wants to/is comfortable with
 - not offering what the visitor/customer wants/needs or researching this
 - not developing the offer to meet customer demand
- Being too locally-focussed, with little understanding of how the group's area/interests fit with the wider picture on both a regional and national basis
- Failure to understand that not all group members can be equal, and that each is likely to benefit from group membership in direct proportion to what they contribute. This leads to:
 - Unrealistic expectations – in terms of financial contributions, and/or time commitment
 - Smaller businesses may be scared off by required financial or time commitment
 - Larger businesses may be dissatisfied by the scope/scale of the group's activities

Conclusion

I do hope that this case study is useful to a wide range of groups. Although the example is a commercial consortium, many of its strengths (and the weaknesses of other groups) may be applied to a range of scenarios, including community-based tourism groups, sector groups (for example hotel associations, business associations etc, and other non-commercial interest groups).

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January 2008