

HOW TO GUIDE:
03. RECRUIT PARTNERS

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RECRUIT PARTNERS

INTRODUCTION

Let's face it. No travel and tourism entities succeed alone. It takes a village. Attractions need hotels. Hotels need nearby restaurants. Restaurants need attractions.

Tourism thrives through symbiosis, and we're all in this tourism and economic development ecosystem together.

While we'll be speaking primarily from a DMO or tourism organization perspective, any tourism-related business should know how to tap into this ecosystem, and that's why this guide is so critical. Here, we'll help you more fully appreciate and leverage what may be your greatest asset — your partnerships. To do so, you'll learn how to:

- **Map your tourism and economic development network**
- **Assess your current and potential partners**
- **Prioritize your existing and new partnerships**
- **Cultivate all partner relationships**
- **Celebrate success**

All DRIVE 2.0 research was conducted in 2019 and compiled pre COVID-19 Crisis.
Please see vatc.org/coronavirus for COVID-19: Industry Response Toolkit.

STEP 1: MAP YOUR TOURISM AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT NETWORK

THE USUAL SUSPECTS

It all starts by identifying the players and their roles in your region and communities. Begin by making a checklist. Think through every potential partner to include on this list and be sure to update it regularly, as you'll want to refer to it time and again. To get you started, here are some potential partners for you to consider:

Local Elected Officials

Includes: mayors, council members, boards of supervisors, treasurers

- Serve as conduits for citizens
- Likely source for funding
- Must understand the need to have mechanisms in place to capitalize on tourism's tax structure

Local Government Officials

Includes: administration, zoning and planning officials, economic development, parks, public works

- Don't forget police, fire fighters, EMTs and other life-saving representatives
- Integral in planning and development issues
- Can address municipal infrastructure capacities and limits

Community Groups

Includes: chamber of commerce, civic organizations, historical society, festival organizers, museums, arts organizations, attractions, guilds

- Likely the largest and most diverse group
- Important in identifying partners
- Acknowledge competition and territorialism
- Grassroots support
- Can serve as the principal advocates for tourism
- Generate enthusiasm for projects



THE USUAL SUSPECTS (cont'd)

Existing Industry

Includes: hospitality services, including hoteliers, bed and breakfasts, attractions, restaurants, outfitters, retail and specialty shops

- May have workforce development input
- Provide insights for visitor profiles
- May play integral role regarding infrastructural improvements

Existing Business Community

Includes: banking, real estate, professional services

- Workforce demands
- Service sector issues
- Potential for new business
- Potential for competition
- Buy-in on tax issues

Public Lands

Includes: local and state park employees, wetlands and trails associations, outdoor guides, natural interpreters, outfitters, Nature Conservancy representatives, "friends of" groups

- Concerns over environmental impacts of likely attractions

Media

Includes: newspaper, radio, television, out-of-home, and, most importantly, online

- Bloggers and social network influencers (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.)

Education

Includes: administrators, teachers, student groups, parent advocates

- Public and private universities, colleges, trade schools, high schools, middle and grade schools

Important Social Groups

- Minority groups
- Ethnic groups
- Religious groups
- Youth group

Virginia Economic Development and Tourism Organizations

Includes: VTC, VEDP, the Virginia Chamber of Commerce, GO Virginia, Catalyst VA, Cooperative Extension, Virginia Small Business Development Center, VRLTA, VADMO, DHCD, DGIF, DCR, Agriculture Office, and others

Virginia State Agencies

Includes: appropriate state agencies like Virginia Economic Development Partnership (VEDP), Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS), Virginia Department of Small Business and Supplier Diversity, and others.



THE UNHERALDED PLAYERS

Local Residents

The way your residents think about tourism in their community can cut both ways. Partnering with residents can both take advantage of the positive sentiment they bring to the table, as well as mitigate any negative associations they may have.

In every community, you'll find people who love where they live, love their favorite businesses and destinations, and love to share their region's story. These are your biggest fans, and with a little nurturing, they can become your ambassadors — the ones who help create content, push your story, and showcase your region in a way that feels organic and authentic. They're the ones who can clue visitors into those hidden gems and off-the-beaten-path experiences and make people feel like insiders when they're visiting. And, since they often play the part of informal tour guide when friends and relatives visit, they're well-versed in what you have to offer.

DMOs and attractions who realize the power of these advocates are intentionally organizing tourism "ambassador" education and training programs. And local companies, particularly in the hospitality sector, are even paying for their employees to attend these training sessions.

Here are five examples of cities already running effective ambassador programs:

- Nashville – Music City Sound Check: Five separate training courses and tours determined by interest and part of town
- Niagara – Niagara Ambassadors: 60-minute online course for residents who are hosting visiting friends and family

- Santa Monica – I am Santa Monica: Customized training at your place of work
- Richmond – I am Tourism: Each workshop includes a two-hour classroom session and a 90-minute guided bus tour of Richmond
- Oklahoma City – Greater Oklahoma City Area Tourism Ambassadors: CTA half-day classroom session and homework assignments

While residents may sometimes be your biggest fans, they can also become some of your most vocal critics, particularly in those communities where the size of the tourism industry contributes to local traffic congestion or overcrowding at local attractions. And, if residents don't have a high opinion of their town, they can hurt your cause as frontline representatives. For example, someone dining in a restaurant may ask their server what there is to do around town, and if that server responds by saying, "Nothing much," that's the narrative the visitor will take with them, and they'll likely choose to simply go back to their hotel room.

However, by bringing residents into the fold through active partnership, tourism organizations and leaders can help them see the true impact the industry has in making their community more vibrant — and how these positive impacts outweigh the negatives they may perceive.

THE UNHERALDED PLAYERS (cont'd)

Local Small Businesses and Entrepreneurs

Tourism organizations sometimes overlook small businesses and entrepreneurs when looking for partners, when in fact they may just be your most valuable collaborators.

Think about it. Every large tourism business today was once simply an idea in the mind of an entrepreneur. Orlando draws over 70 million visitors every year and is home to the largest corporate attraction on the planet. But not too long ago, it was all just an idea in the mind of a struggling animator in Hollywood.

Your community's small business owners and entrepreneurs have big ideas and ambitions too. By reaching out to them and including them in your partnership efforts, you may discover the next big thing to transform your community forever.

On the ground, small players and entrepreneurs can also react nimbly to visitor needs and trends. Remember those unmet needs you discovered in How to Guide #2? Chances are your small businesses and entrepreneurs are best equipped to help meet them. When you connect small businesses and entrepreneurs with each other and help them see how their ideas and offerings connect with the larger tourism ecosystem, they often become the mortar.

To connect with dozens of Virginia's startup accelerators and incubators, visit:

[ideagist.com/list-of-startup-accelerators-and-incubators-in-virginia-usa](https://www.ideagist.com/list-of-startup-accelerators-and-incubators-in-virginia-usa)





STEP 2: ASSESS YOUR CURRENT AND POTENTIAL PARTNERS

ASSESS YOUR PARTNERS

If your tourism ecosystem is thriving, chances are you have many partnerships in place, which is commendable. However, we suspect the list you generated in Step 1 includes more potential partners than active partners.

Go through your list and assess the strengths of each existing partner and potential partner. Keep in mind that not all partners bring equal value, but all can contribute to your tourism efforts in some fashion.

To aid in your assessment, here are some questions you may ask of each group:

Current Partners:

- Why does this partnership exist?
- How long has it been in place?
- How does it deliver value for my organization and/or the local industry?
- Could it deliver more?
- What do we provide our partners?
- Could we provide more?
- Is there duplication or redundancy with other current partners?
- Can roles be separated or better defined?

Potential Partners:

- How could a partnership with this organization help us?
- What could we bring to this partnership? How could we best help them?

- Is there duplication or redundancy with current partners?
- Can roles be separated or better defined if we partner with this new partner?

While many of your current and potential partners will most likely be established players like governmental institutions, attractions, or lodging establishments, don't forget you have the power to grow any specific partners you need.

Here's how: Create a presence at the business incubators and higher education institutions in your community, which could include marketing materials and periodic in-person visits, especially for rural areas looking to attract talent from urban universities by showcasing how ripe their communities are for entrepreneurial startups. Partner with those organizations that support business start-ups. Realize that some of these startups could be the next scooter business, or map app, or virtual reality tool that could transform tourism in your region.

Make sure the directors or leaders of those organizations know who you are and how you can help their start-ups develop their businesses. You might even be able to work out arrangements where your help gains you early access to their product or service once it's live. Better yet, you may meet some people who can start a business to serve your pressing need.

Entrepreneurs and incubators could be an untapped resource for your tourism efforts, so invest some time to get to know the players. Here's a list of some key regional organizations worth a call or visit: dhcd.virginia.gov/cbl



STEP 3: PRORITIZE YOUR EXISTING AND NEW PARTNERSHIPS

PRIORITIZE YOUR LIST

Through Steps 1 and 2, you now have an up-to-date list and related insights on most, if not all, of your current and potential partners. View this information as one of your priceless assets that helps you accomplish more than you ever could alone.

Chances are, you have created a long and extensive list of partners. Don't be daunted by this. Rather, look for ways to prioritize your current and potential partnerships based on your most important and pressing needs, tasks, and initiatives.

For example, plot out all of the initiatives contained in your current strategic plan, or a component of the plan such as product development. Using your up-to-date list and related insights on current and potential partners, identify which partner can help you implement your plan most effectively.

Keep in mind, this process is not meant to de-emphasize any partnerships, but simply find more effective ways to tap into them. And, regardless of whether you feel certain partners may be more helpful to your efforts now, all your partner relationships will require cultivation, which we'll detail in Step 4.

TAKE YOUR TIME

While we've suggested prioritizing your partnerships based on your most pressing needs and priorities, this shouldn't be construed as advice to seek only those partners who can help you right this second.

Like any good relationship, you'll need to put in everything you hope to get out, not just show up with a presentation and expect everyone at the table to fall in love you or your idea. The fact is, selfishness will come across loud and clear, and coming to the table with an ask can be a surefire way to turn people off. Instead, take the time to attend as many meetings throughout your community as possible — school boards, planning boards, hospital foundation boards — even if they seem unrelated to tourism. Go with the intent solely to listen, learn, and make yourself available to them.

By maintaining a regular presence at governmental and organizational committee meetings, you'll not only be demonstrating your commitment to learning about your partners and finding ways you both can help each other, you'll also be demonstrating the commitment of the tourism industry as a whole to strengthen the community.

STEP 4: CULTIVATE ALL PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS

GREAT PARTNERSHIPS

Great partnerships are built over time and meet the following parameters:

1. The expectations are clear and well-understood by all. In any effective partnership, everyone knows their role and what's expected of them. This is true in business as well as life. Set clear expectations for everyone you're inviting to the table and let everyone find their niche. Not everyone can lead, so some must follow or take on alternative tasks.
2. All partners feel like they are part of the team. You simply can't play favorites or leave people or organizations on the sideline. Like youth sports, it's important that everyone gets a turn and has their say. Be intentional about seeking input from all partners.
3. The partnership can grow and evolve. While your original intent sets the trajectory for the partnership, you must let it grow, expand, and change as needed. The most effective partnerships don't remain static. Rather, they live, breathe, and evolve as participants become the sum of the parts.
4. Honesty and transparency are paramount. Broken trust ruins partnerships. By insisting on openness, honesty, and transparency from all members, you'll protect the effort from an early demise.
5. Everyone benefits. The essence of every great partnership is that the relationship is fair and beneficial to both partners.

As you build your relationships, remember that the most effective partnerships center around a focus or mission that binds the parties together. Approaching partners with a specific goal in mind can be especially effective when it comes to those who may view you or your other partners as competitors. For example, in Colorado, competing ski industry leaders were able to rally around the cause of building more affordable housing for seasonal workers, because they could see clearly how it would benefit all the operators.





STEP 5: CELEBRATE SUCCESS

Give your partners credit for success. Thank them. Celebrate them. Honor them with awards. Profile them in your communications channels.

Make it a point to showcase the real synergy of the collaboration. By showcasing collaborative approaches and celebrating how this team spirit added tremendous value to your community's entire tourism ecosystem, you can even recruit new partners and build a culture of teamwork that defines your local travel and tourism industry.



SWVA: FINDING THE RIGHT PARTNERS TO MOVE FORWARD

With Virginia coal production falling by 50% since 2008, towns and counties throughout Southwest Virginia have had to make a difficult decision: sit tight and hope for the return of coal industry jobs or take on the tough task of diversifying their local economies.

But diversifying can be a tall order for towns with 4,000 residents or even less, so rather than go it alone, regional leaders instead have forged ahead together to tap into the resources Southwest Virginia has always had in abundance — the splendor of its surroundings and the spirit of its people.

Working together, a host of leaders across the region came together, including Friends of Southwest Virginia. Centered in Abingdon, this group has become a resource for the region's 19 counties, four cities, and 53 towns. Friends of Southwest Virginia along with local government and planning district commissions throughout the region help coordinate economic redevelopment efforts, as well as marketing, branding, and other initiatives.

Indeed, through this partnership, communities across the region have been able to tap into funding sources they likely would not have had the time, resources, or staffing to pursue, such as Appalachian Regional Commission POWER (Partnerships for Opportunity and Workforce and Economic Revitalization) Initiative grants.

These grants have run the gamut — from workforce development initiatives in drone piloting, cybersecurity, and manufacturing to downtown building revitalization efforts and renewable energy initiatives.

One of the ARC POWER grants awarded, however, has gone

toward communities and Friends of Southwest Virginia has dubbed Southwest Virginia Outdoors. This \$3 million has been and will continue to be used to enhance the outdoor recreation industry as an economic driver in a four-county region in southwestern Virginia. ARC funds have supported or will soon support:

- The development of four access points to the New River that strategically link the river to nearby communities' hospitality and tourism services including a destination center;
- The construction a 4,000-square-foot Gateway Center to the High Knob Recreation Area, that will provide visitors with more centralized access to numerous nearby recreation assets;
- The creation of an Appalachian Trail Center in downtown Damascus- scheduled to open in summer 2020; and
- The creation of a 30-mile, multi-use trail connecting Breaks Interstate Park directly to downtown Haysi's business district.

According to ARC projections, the totality of the projects supported through these grants will increase travel expenditures in project locations by \$30 million over the next five years and create 60 new businesses and 200 new jobs.

None of these initiatives will impact one town alone, and none could be undertaken by one town alone. However, through the strengths of its partnerships, Southwest Virginia is tapping into the resources it needs to shape its future.



MARION: BUILDING A SMALL BUSINESS BACKBONE

A small town's appeal as a travel and tourism destination rests on the backs of its small business community, and in the town of Marion, the county seat and largest town in Smyth County with a population of roughly 6,000, leaders have brought together new initiatives, public-private partnerships, and engaged the community to solidify the foundation for current and future growth.

In fact, Marion was chosen as the "Small Business Community of the Year" by the U.S. Small Business Administration, in part due to its hosting of the popular small business boot camp "Pop Up Marion," a free, five-week business development program that provides training for all levels of entrepreneurs — from those interested in exploring opportunities to seasoned business owners looking for a tune up.

A partnership program of the town's Department of Community and Economic Development, with funding from the town, the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development and Wells Fargo, "Pop Up Marion" participants are able to use the information sessions to develop a business plan and can also be eligible for up to \$5,000 in startup grant funds and an additional \$15,000 in low-interest loan funds.

This type of knowledge and financial incentive can be the difference in a boutique shopping center, upscale eatery, or other tourism-related business making it through those difficult early hurdles. To date, "Pop Up Marion" has helped to train 275 entrepreneurs, sell 11 downtown buildings, fill an additional 22 storefronts, create 30 new businesses, generate 118 new jobs, assist with three facade improvements and spur more than \$2.6 million in private reinvestment. In fact, the program has helped to lower Marion's downtown storefront vacancy rates from over 17% to under 4% and is being used in communities across Virginia and the region as a model of Main Street-centered tourism and economic development efforts.



FAIRFAX: STUDYING AN EMERGING INDUSTRY

In 2016, the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors noticed that while the county had many quality sports facilities available to its residents, it hadn't yet found a way to take advantage of the \$10 billion sports tourism market on its doorstep.

As a first step to examining why that was the case, the county assembled a robust partnership task force comprised of the Fairfax County Park Authority (FCPA), Neighborhood and Community Services (NCS), Visit Fairfax, Athletic Council, Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS), NOVA Parks, George Mason University, Northern Virginia Community College, Fairfax County Economic Development Authority, and representatives from private industry and government.

Almost immediately, the Sport Tourism Task Force found that the county's facilities often lacked the scale and proximity to each other that would allow the county to attract sports tourism events due to the government's focus on supporting community-based sports organizations and clubs as well as the needs of its citizens.

In order to grow sports tourism in Fairfax County, the task force found sports tourism facilities needed to be built to meet the market demands of the industry through clustering of the facilities at specified locations. These facilities, funded or financed largely with private and/or sports tourism dollars, would be available to residents when not used for sports tourism purposes, thereby also meeting community needs.

The task force then outlined specific recommendations for governance and policy changes, as well as recommendations for potential tourism opportunities, including indoor ski and snow facilities, mountain biking, several existing complex improvements, a new indoor track/hardcourt/field house, a new tennis complex, and investing in Esports infrastructure.

And two of those projects are now underway or in design stages. Fairfax Peak, a proposed facility offered by McLean-based Alpine-X LLC in conjunction with Netherlands-based SnowWorld International B.V., would be constructed under a public-private partnership on the 489-acre county-owned landfill in Lorton. The facility would have snow sports, a hotel, a mountain coaster, wave and surf pool, a gondola, ropes course, zip line, biking and hiking trails, a water park, radio control plane flying and other passive recreation activities.

Also, to demonstrate regional support for Esports infrastructural improvements, the Virginia High School League Esports pilot program has been established and will launch its inaugural season in 2019 with three different game leagues. Once those improvements are made, the county hopes to be able to lure large gaming tournaments to the area, many of which are currently going to D.C.



CHESAPEAKE BAY: PARTNERING TO PROTECT AND ENHANCE DEFINING RESOURCES

Ecotourism is a vital draw for many of Coastal Virginia's communities. Realizing this potential, the planning district commissions of the Eastern Shore, Middle Peninsula and Northern Neck partnered to receive a \$2.7 million matching grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Coastal Zone Management program. The money will be used to establish the Rural Coastal Virginia Alliance (RCVA) and fund initiatives to enhance the region's appeal as an ecotourism hub.

Along with initiatives to help manage beaches and wetlands, fisheries and coastal wildlife habitats, waterfront redevelopment and fisheries, water and air pollution, shoreline sanitation and public access to waterways, three specific initiatives funded through the grant include the development of an engaging itinerary tool in partnership with the Virginia Oyster Trail, development of the Virginia Water Trails website, and promotional efforts for the 2019 Ecotour Guide Course.

With marketing efforts such as the Virginia River Realm and itinerary tool, visitors are better able to plan not only what farms to visit, but also what ancillary community and cultural assets to hit as well. Through the Virginia Water Trails website, both visitors and locals alike will have better access to planning resources that will allow them to more intimately explore the area's bays, creeks, and rivers. And through better promotion of the Ecotour Guide Course, an initiative undertaken through partnership with VTC, DEQ, local coastal planners, community colleges, state park interpreters, and private stakeholders, the area can continue to enlist ambassadors who are passionate about sharing and protecting the resources that make rural Coastal Virginia a unique travel destination.



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