

Sussex recovery communications

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Experience West Sussex

It was great to take part in the Experience West Sussex, Survive webinar today. There were quite a few questions about communications so I thought it would be helpful to summarise a few pointers for the future.

It is easy to be overwhelmed by the pure fury of the initial onslaught of problems and the unprecedented challenges of a crisis. Panellists on the Experience West Sussex chat talked about being numb and in shock at the sudden halt to their hard built-up businesses. The current uncertainty about when and how people can begin to travel is also paralysing businesses. We all have no known end in sight to plan for.

However a clear message emerged from today's debate that advance recovery planning is important now so you're ready to capture your customers attention the minute it's possible to welcome them back. We've already got recovery marketing plans ready for some tourist board clients which can be refined and launched quickly at the appropriate time.

Phase one - Pre-recovery phase - keep continuing customer conversations and innovate

Today's panellists talked about the need to keep their organisations in the public eye more than ever before. Our travellers and customers will still be dreaming of places that they want to travel to, when they can. So do keep your customer and industry conversations going and innovate with ideas such as:

- **Keep talking** Keep your social media conversations running. People may not be able to travel but they don't want to be ignored. In China social media platforms like Douyin (the Chinese version of Tik Tok) and Kuaishou reported social media use increased by 30 per cent during January and February. Listen to your audience concerns and questions and answer them in the social channels where they are being asked.
- **Celebrate memories** Consider Throwback Thursday discussions to thank past guests and visitors and ask them to share their memories. Do you have newspaper articles, videos or influencer visits you can go back to and reshare, thanking the writers, bloggers or customers too for their memories and hoping you can welcome them back again soon.
- **Broadcast yourself** One of the common google searches in Wuhan during the lockdown was looking for things to do to overcome boredom. It was great to hear about Amberley Castle's creative gardening video series and video tours. Give your audiences something that will help them if you cannot welcome them now. Put museums online, do live q&as with gallery directors. If festivals have been cancelled can you create a mini online version instead with live-streamed or recorded sessions with musicians, artists or chefs.

- **Share good news** - there is a real appetite for human interest good news stories which can also profile a region. You can look at examples from the Press Association's new service called [uplifting](#) If you've got a heart warming story from Sussex just share it with copy@pa.media
- **Amplify local voices** After a crisis people are always interested in the known and familiar. Reassure future international inbound travellers by highlighting people from source markets who are working in the region. For example if you've got a superb French chef working in Sussex, share their tips and profiles on your French communication channels or with other tourism organisations for their international promotion
- **Fight fear with facts and innovation** People are now beginning to consider what the new normal might be when the lock down is lifted. Do share your increased hygiene initiatives. In the last two weeks in discussions with media this debate has moved from being newsworthy, to an expected message that every business should have ready as a matter of course. Can you also innovate with new ways of experiencing your service or attraction to give people more privacy and seclusion - offer private tours, whole hotel takeovers?
- **Promote for the long term** you may not know how and when you're going to open this year but consumers and media are booking and writing with more confidence about 2021. Launch new packages early, extend your advance booking periods. Target stories for longer-lead print titles which need to plan three months ahead, but are going to press during Covid-19 uncertainty
- **Use your closed period creatively** - It was good to hear about all the maintenance works being bought forward while guests can't visit. What else can you do in this pre-recovery phase to set yourself up for success in the future? New training schemes for staff? Targeting broadcast opportunities for the future? I really liked 2xs's idea of creating webinars with watersports' experts to engage the community. And the success of Historic Sussex Hotels' gift voucher service valid for up to 18 months sounds very positive.
- **Explore new partnerships** It was also interesting to hear the discussion about working together to promote Sussex as a whole. Collaborative campaigns can definitely make a difference. In today's circumstances think widely about who could be involved in such a grouping such as retailers, BIDs and inbound transportation providers from Eurotunnel and ferries as well as trains and Gatwick Airport. For example last year we wrote a three year marketing strategy for a wide group of stakeholders which included BIDs, transport providers and regional tourism boards which had joined together to create a Domestic Tourism Consortium for London, to reverse a decline in domestic visitors with London&Partners as the delivery partner.

Phase two - Emerging recovery phase - targeting those most likely to travel

To have the fastest recovery phase possible it is always important to prioritise the people who are most likely to respond and travel first. Do put social and google search monitoring in place to understand when people start thinking about travel planning and booking again so you're ahead of the curve. Don't assume those audiences are the same as in the past. As ever, test and learn digitally.

In order of priority, audiences to address after a crisis typically follow this pattern:

Domestic audiences - local people as well as expatriates from your primary source markets who may be sharing images of a destination, hotel or attraction back to their friends and family

Neighbouring audiences - people who know and are familiar with your destination are more likely to return first and fastest.

Repeat visitors - in uncertain times people often feel safer in known locations. A big push on encouraging repeat visitors to return to places they've been to before can be an important first step in driving recovery bookings

Resilient visitors - track the guests who are most likely to return faster. Do you have a special interest niche which has loyal and dedicated travellers? This could be bird watching or adventure seekers, or fans of a major event held in a particular country. It might also be demographic - a younger or older target audience rather than family audiences.

Group visitors - after long periods of isolation how can Sussex businesses welcome groups of people who want to reconnect together - families, friends and colleagues?

Phase three - full recovery, a hard fight for audiences

Once people can begin to start visiting this will be the most competitive the travel industry has ever known as countries and brands look to build back their economies and cashflows. But it will also undoubtedly be a different industry. While some businesses will fail, the full recovery period will see the emergence of new nimble players looking for take advantage of the changes.

Do spend time now preparing in detail for phase three even when you don't know the timing of your recovery plans. Ask what events might you create, what marketing will you implement. Have creative campaigns at the ready which can be trialled digitally and switched on quickly. Also use this time to review how to build a sustainable recovery strategy which builds back high-value audiences but mitigates negative impacts.

Travel organisations that work fast and smart in all three recovery phases - pre-recovery, emerging recovery and the full recovery phase will lead the field.