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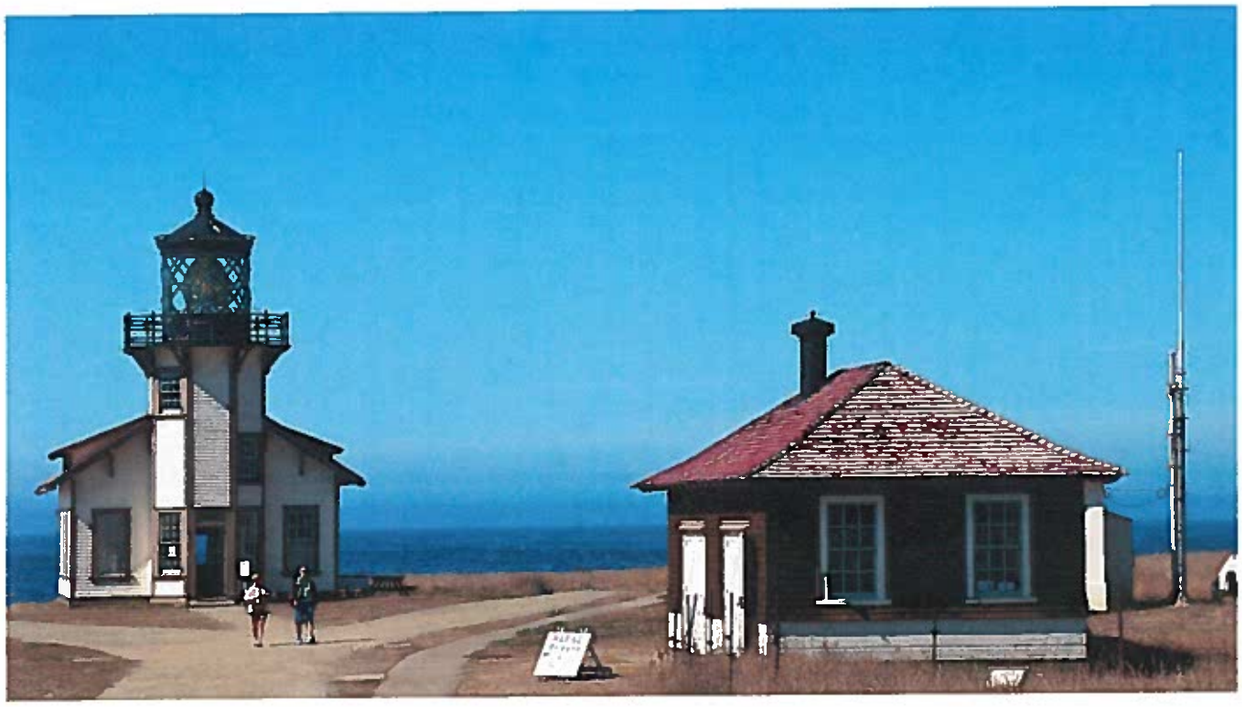

Visit Mendocino County

Strategic Planning Insights Report

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Strategic Insights

Overview

In the interviews we conducted with Visit Mendocino County stakeholders, we identified the following six themes:

1. Visit Mendocino County is at a major inflection point as an organization.
2. The organization has continued a trend of professionalization, despite setbacks.
3. Member/stakeholder engagement appears to be low compared to other destination marketing organizations.
4. There is a greater opportunity for VMC to act as a tourism evangelist in the county.
5. The distance between the coast and inland areas is more than geographic.
6. Mendocino County assets—and the area itself—suffer from low awareness.

On the pages that follow, each theme is detailed with quotes from our interviews, as well as strategic implications for Visit Mendocino County.

Visit Mendocino County is at a major inflection point as an organization.

What we heard:

- "[The Board and VMC leaders] are not very aligned on the mission. Part of the problem, as I see it, is because the staff and Board are so focused on heads in beds. They dance around for lodging. People come for the entire experience. Lodging is just the mechanism to collect the finds of people coming to the area. The Board and staff struggle with that dynamic."
- "Now that VMC is out from under [the Lodging Association], they can chart their own course to flourish—to grow into its role as a destination marketing organization."
- "Brent has given notice. I'm not sure why, and I'm sorry to hear it. I hope we're not so far out of alignment that it makes him want to leave."
- "What's challenging right now is that, the more successful it is, that there is a positive thing going on, that they have influence, and what they say matters, [Brent's] resignation injures that.

Implications for Strategy:

- Now that Visit Mendocino County has begun strategic planning, and knowing that there will be turnover in the Executive Director position, the organization has the opportunity to set a strategy framework that will guide the organization for the next three years, and will assist the Board in identifying the kind of replacement they need for Brent.
- Visit Mendocino County can capitalize on progress and deliberately shape the future of the organization.

The organization has continued a trend of professionalization, despite setbacks.

What we heard:

- "They are modern. They have fresh logos for their events. They are lifting the tide, and other organizations in this area need to catch up. They are a good example."
- "One of the things they have done well is to show the vast array of things that are available."
- "Consistency is important— in look, feel, and all the things they are promoting in this county."
- "I believe that the organization has momentum. I believe there were some rifts there, but that has smoothed out."
- "TOT is way up. Keep pushing the right buttons."
- "A good tone was set by Scott. Now we can do even more—use the freedom that Visit Mendocino County has been given, and go promote the wonders of Mendocino County."
- "[They are] growing… they are in transition."
- "I would like to express my disappointment in hearing that Brent gave his notice. He came in with a strong leadership style that was refreshing."
- "I want to make sure that, when a plan like this is put in place, that there are actionable, measurable outcomes. There are timelines, and measurable outcomes and things like that. I respond to that, and others will too."

Implications for Strategy:

- Maintaining momentum will be crucial, and should be considered as part of the strategies that are chosen during the strategic planning process.
- The organization has a solid foundation to build from, and should recognize that in its strategies—that is, consider that it may not need to reinvent the wheel on some things.

Member/stakeholder engagement appears to be low compared to other destination marketing organizations.

What we heard:

- "I haven't dealt with board members, or attended board meetings, so I don't have too much knowledge on that."
- "[I haven't had] much dealing with the board."
- "Don't focus on the nay-sayers… focus on the opportunities."
- "I have to say I'm not that tuned in to the current board and staff. There have been some large transitions in the last year and I wouldn't be surprised if they are not all well-aligned."
- "Improve stakeholder outreach. We don't interact with them and there is a little bit of hesitation by some destination marketing, and like organizations, to coordinate and work with them."
- "I haven't been able to get more people involved—fresh blood, if you will. It's been very difficult, and it continues to be very difficult."
- "We need to make it a situation that people *want* to be involved (on the Board)."
- "It's hard to get mid-sized properties involved, and that's a strategic problem."
- "I don't know, and maybe I should know. There should be a way to communicate what's happening. Could be my missing things. The constituency does need to know what's happening. Because I don't know, that could be part of the problem. People like me—who are interested to know—don't, so maybe that's an opportunity to communicate better and with different media. Internal marketing to the constituents."

Implications for Strategy:

- While this isn't unique to Visit Mendocino County, the level of disconnect may be higher, based on our observations, than in other areas. This is probably a legacy issue that is tied to history and geography. However, this is both a major opportunity and a major need for the organization, and strategies to increase connection and collaboration should be considered for the plan.

There is a greater opportunity for VMC to act as a tourism evangelist in the county.

What we heard:

- "They need to focus on lodging, activities, and events."
- "Also continued reminders—I love reminders of all the things they have as resources for me. A reminder if there's a resource out there that I'm not using."
- "More collaboration with local agencies. Such a small pool. Let's leverage and not fragment our efforts."
- "Focus on expanding their connections to all of the county. Self-promote the organization to educate who Visit Mendocino County is and what they do, how they do it… in-county PR work."
- "I consider them to be the professionals, with a larger footprint and network. It would be great if they would share opportunities, resources and technical assistance to other organizations and town functions that could benefit from it."
- "There is an educational piece around the benefit of tourism."
- "They provide a service that I like: a weekly "what's happening inland and on the coast". It's not their biggest role, but they do a good job."

Implications for Strategy:

- As the overarching tourism organization in the county, Visit Mendocino County can work to solidify and expand its influence through active promotion of the full benefits of tourism to local economies, and by promoting their own capacity and capability to strengthen that impact.

The distance between the coast and inland areas is more than geographic.

What we heard:

- "I believe they are here to promote the coast and inland Mendocino county for travel for near and far. Represent the full gamut of things we have here – which is widespread and pretty unique."
- "We are kind of lacking events that are all-inclusive of the area."
- "I think it's important for you to know that they have a lot of strong opinions coming at them, between the inland and coast [representatives]. It's hard to tell people to go out to Booneville and then come to the coast as one trip, but they do a good job."
- "[They should be] maintaining and growing the tourism—and talk about the whole county, not just the coast"
- "I don't really know [what VMC is doing]. I don't see it from my inland perspective."
- "Mendocino county is two separate worlds. They should look at them independently: Coast—enjoy the scenery… the relaxing coast. Inland—provides small town/big city charm."
- "I'm not in tune because Visit Mendocino County has kind of surprisingly operated in a vacuum in Fort Bragg. We just don't have that much interaction with them. As a case in point, I have never met their new director."

Implications for Strategy:

- There seems to be some "us vs. them" in play between the different areas. Although this may never be completely resolved, Visit Mendocino County should recognize this in its strategies, and build on the successes it has had to date in bringing the areas together.

Mendocino County assets—and the area itself—suffer from low awareness.

What we heard:

- "There is a lot of health-related travel. Being outdoors is big now, which is good because that's what we have."
- "[An opportunity is] a general increase in the community interest in creating a draw for this area. A renewed interest in reviving our events, improving them, and getting a better draw to them."
- "I think the active/adventure tourism is another big thing."
- "Legalization of marijuana. It's been here. Now that it's legal, it is something that is there. Not sure that the county wants to promote that—it's a question. Could it be done right? It's a county historic brand trait, intened or not."
- "Mendocino County is a playground for people of all ages. We need to remember that. Make sure that what we're doing—the message—that there's a range of things to do here is attractive across the spectrum of people."
- "Marijuana … it's not just coming, it's here. We need to understand how it's going to affect business. It needs to be considered."
- "The attractions are key. Take advantage of the assets we have by focusing on the attractions it has, and exploiting those to the world. That's what is going to bring people here. Needs to focus on what it has and use those hooks."
- "Market the uniqueness of the county. It's a different place, and possibly a different time. Our wine industry is growing, and tasting rooms aren't as convenient as Napa and Sonoma. It takes more of a commitment to get here [but] it's worth it."
- "The natural beauty here is first and foremost. There are so many state parks. We do have an amazing wine country that is still unknown when compared to Napa and Sonoma. It's still an opportunity."
- "I think the brand is untapped. People are over Sonoma and Napa in some ways, and want to come farther north."
- "[They should be] having a good relationship with the cannabis folks."
- "I want the Mendocino County name everywhere… Get the name out there in a smart kind of way… Thinking big. Napa is big. Sonoma is big—people know it. Mendocino needs to be the same."

Implications for Strategy:

- Visit Mendocino County has the opportunity to emerge as a strong and professional brand manager for the entire area, in a way that supports and complements local areas and tourism assets.

  Marijuana tourism, outdoor/adventure tourism, and wine tourism emerged as major themes in our conversations.

STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

Interviews and/or Workshops

Facilitated by:	Matthew Landkamer, Coraggio Group
	Craig Tames, Coraggio Group
Roger & Laraine Galloway	Agate Cove Inn
John Cesano	Anderson Valley Winegrowers Association
Jan Rodriguez	Baechtel Creek Inn & Spa
Martha Barra	Barra of Mendocino
Katrina Kessen	Barra of Mendocino/Willits Chamber of Commerce
Jon Glidewell	Beachcomber Motel & Spa
Kuami Kao	Best Western Vista Manor
Wendy Roberts	BID Advisory Board
Marcus Magdelano	Boonville Hotel
Molly Barker	Botannical Gardens
Guy Pacurar	Brewery Gulch Inn
Anna Bueselink	Campovida
Jennifer Owen	City of Fort Bragg/Visit Fort Bragg
Marie Jones	City of Fort Bragg
Linda Ruffing	City of Fort Bragg
Scott Schneider	City of Fort Bragg/Former CEO for VMC
Richard Shoemaker	City of Point Arena
Sage Sangiacomo	City of Ukiah
Adrienne Moore	City of Willits
Kevin Spears	Comfort Inn & Suites Ukiah
Steve Dunnicliff	Mendocino County Planning & Building Department
Nick Bhula	Days Inn Ukiah
Jo Bradley	Dennen's Victorian Farmhouse
John Kuhry	Economic Development & Financing Corporation
Anil Bhula	Fairfield Inn & Suites Ukiah
Lindy Peters	Fort Bragg City Council
Dave Turner	Fort Bragg City Council
Willow Anderson	Great Ukiah Chamber of Commerce
Jay Epstein	Greater Ukiah Chamber of Commerce
Sid Harper	Greater Ukiah Chamber of Commerce
Mike & Linda Bradbrook	Gualala Country Inn
Taher Zaki	Hampton Inn Ukiah
Jason Hurst	Harbor Lite Lodge
Heidi Dickerson	Leadership Mendocino
Cally Dym	Little River Inn
Herman Seidell	MacCallum House Inn
Sharon Davis	Mendocino Coast Chamber/Visit Fort Bragg

Alyssum Wier	Mendocino County Arts Council
Dan Gjerde	Mendocino County Board of Supervisors
Dan Hamburg	Mendocino County Board of Supervisors
Alison Glassey	Mendocino County Museum
Paloma Patterson	Mendocino County Museum/Non-profit Contractor
Kira Wojack	Mendocino Film Festival
Barbara Faulkner	Mendocino Music Festival
Alanna	North Cliff Hotel
Andrew Radabaugh	Piazza de Campovida
Kurt Feichtmeir	Ravenridge Cottages/BID Advisory Board
Kit Bliss-Jones	Redwood Coast Chamber
Randy Jones	Redwood Coast Chamber
Robert Juengling	Redwood Coast Chamber
Deb Kessler	Redwood Coast Chamber
Patty Rock	Saracina/Destination Hopland
Susie Plocher	Sea Rock Inn
Robert Jason Pinoli	Skunk Train
Denny Shah	Super 8 Willits
John Dixon	The Inns of Glendeven
James Roberts	The Madrones
Russell Quinan	Theory SF
Chip Sheehan	Theory SF
Jitu Ishwar	Travelodge Ukiah
Jim Brown	Ukiah City Council
Steve Scalmanini	Ukiah City Council
Rick Hansen	Ukiah Main Street Association
Gilbert & Marjorie Ashoff	Vichy Springs Resort
Kathy Chacon	Visit Mendocino County
Alison de Grassi	Visit Mendocino County
Luz Harvey	Visit Mendocino County
Brent Haugen	Visit Mendocino County
Richard Strom	Visit Mendocino County
Vanlee Waters	Visit Mendocino County
Shannon Reilly	Visit Ukiah
Lisa Epstein	Willits Chamber of Commerce
Gerry Gonzalez	Willits City Council
Larry Stranske	Willits City Council
Holly Madrigal	Word of Mouth Magazine/Willits Arts Center/Former Willits City Council