



VERMONT'S TOURISM INDUSTRY::

COMPELLING OR COMPLACENT?

By JEN WILLIAMS, @JEN_BUTSON

The competition is fierce; our natural resources are abundant and our budgets are not. Same old story. Or is it? Vermont welcomes nearly 13 million visitors and about \$2.5 billion in revenue annually. Now, think about the Vermont you knew growing up, or the Vermont you fell in love with as a newcomer 5, 10, 50 years ago. What keeps you here and what motivates you to be reading this article right now? It's likely not the dollar figures. Though tourism provides about 30,000 jobs for Vermonters - eight percent of our workforce - it's a rare Vermonter who moves here because the cost of living is so affordable and tourism dollars so reliable.

So what does keep the industry and the people in it afloat? Spoiler: There are no answers in this article, only questions. May it start a discussion that we can answer together over time.

Due to our great quality of life as Vermonters, we often do see the bright side: "Hurray, it's the first day above 0 degrees in two weeks!" We also have countless opportunities to point to our excellence: "No really, it's the best beer in the world..." But for a moment, let's be uncomfortable and ask ourselves what we could be doing better.

The Lake Champlain Regional Chamber of Commerce recently launched the mobile version of its website, **Vermont.org**. This late-bloomer improvement was a step in the right direction for consumer usability and the Chamber ultimately saved money by waiting until easy and affordable, less glitchy options were available. To wait was a calculated risk; transferring the site to mobile also meant putting other pressing website initiatives on hold. As the Chamber's primary welcome mat for tourism marketing, having to wait is a serious matter that many of us can relate to. Think of inns upgrading linens piecemeal or bike rental shops having to eke out another year from its aging fleet. We can't do it all now. So how do we best allocate our time and resources?

University of Vermont Professor Frank Bryan has often talked about the paradox of Vermont. I'll paraphrase one of his more popular concepts: We're like racecars on a track, but we're not the lead car. In fact, we're so far behind, that we've been lapped. And by doing so, we managed to be in the front.

Bryan shared this point of view with a ski industry audience in 2008 and today, it beckons the question of whether or not we're even in the same race anymore?

Fortunately, we don't have an identity problem. We have multiple identities and that is the very essence of our brand. We parley between cow-patty filled farm tours and concert halls that bring in the finest of chamber musicians, and we welcome Hindus, hipsters and hippies with an equal earnest and honest "Hello," on the rec path. But is that enough? What does Derby Line offer that Disney and Dubai do not? How can coming in last - or being perpetually behind - make us strong enough to withstand market shifts and consumers' amorphous demands?

As residents, we know the many attributes that this state has to offer. How do we maintain our combination of idyllic, pristine landscapes, working farms, enticing tech hubs, and strong artistic and cultural pulse? Moreover, how do we communicate this?

When it comes to increasing visitors, how do we "woo" effectively? I don't mean shiny digital ads, deep discounts or snappy Instagram posts. I'm talking lifelong romance type wooing. How do we create loyal, passionate Vermontophiles, the ones who come back for generations and whose kids attend college and make a life here?

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EDUCATION: INVESTING IN OUR FUTURE

BY TOM TORTI, @TOMTORTI

DAVID SEAVER PHOTOGRAPHY



Recently the Chamber made news by supporting the administration's proposal both to raise licensing fees on mutual funds and to set aside a portion of that new non-tax revenue (roughly 20%) to fund college saving accounts (CSA's) for all newborn Vermont children. We believe, along with many others, that those who have set aside money for post-secondary education are more likely to obtain it than those who did not. Our position raised some issues for our members in the education community. I felt it important to share those ideas with the membership.

In supporting CSA's, the Chamber waded squarely into the raging waters of the pre-K and higher education debate. Many with whom I spoke were passionate and articulate about the funding needs of their programs and the anemic funding that has been appropriated to them. Few argue that CSA's are a bad idea. They view it instead as an odd spending choice in light of current higher education pressures. Their consternation arises from the fact that education programs with demonstrated positive outcomes have seen only partial, or in some instances, level funding. Level funding in the face of inflation is actually a reduction in real dollars. The argument they make is simple: if Vermont believes that early education and post-secondary education are essential to success as an adult, then we ought to fully fund the state's existing infrastructure before embarking on new programs. In the case of the Vermont State Colleges, level funding results in a deeper shift of costs onto students and parents. These costs, now among the highest for public colleges in the country, provide disincentives for attendance. By erecting financing barriers to in-state higher education, we are making it too easy for young people to leave the state or to take the path we know causes problems.

So, it is legitimate to ask whether our support for CSA's was wrong or if it was right within an upside down construct. After much discussion, I believe that it is clearly the latter. The education policies and programs that we have endorsed as a state are good for individuals, good for families, good for communities and good for the long-term economic health of our state. Chamber policy has frequently referenced our support for post-secondary education. We strongly believe that a good job with benefits is the first step in breaking the cycle of poverty and reliance on the social safety net. Good jobs in the 21st century economy require education and training beyond high school. We need the 40% of our youth that do not go on to post-secondary programs to do so. We need to sustain a vibrant, accessible and high quality public institutions. Such a system makes a compelling case for young people to stay in Vermont to pursue their post-secondary education. Nationally, 80% of college students stay in their home state to attend college. In Vermont, that number is 46%.

What is the solution? First and foremost, the state does not have the capacity to increase taxes. Instead and in the face of competing interests, the administration and legislature must make funding the education continuum a top priority. It is not acceptable to say that the well has run dry thereby forcing students and taxpayers to disproportionately shoulder the burden. Likewise, it is equally incumbent upon our education systems and governing bodies to continue to accept the need to adapt, to innovate and live with reasonable spending increases.

If we believe that our youth are the future of our state, we cannot continue a pattern of austerity and neglect towards the very entities that are best positioned to have the greatest impact on our future. Doing so puts the programs that support all Vermonters and Vermont industries at risk.

In tourism, do we offer young Vermonters opportunities for advancement, and does management have an adequate support system for one another? Are we too burnt out to learn about these opportunities, let alone take advantage of them? Is there adequate collaborative marketing and ease of access for start-ups? Do we excel in providing world-class customer service - including frontline salutations in the language of the 10 percent of our overall visitors that come from Canada, primarily Quebec? Do our multi-tasking innkeepers/toilet-cleaners/drivers have the staying power to stay relevant? Is our infrastructure even equipped to welcome the droves of travelers to our downtowns and roadways if we were to be wildly successful? While we aspire toward that ever elusive increased occupancy, we also must grapple with parking and public transportation for urban Millennials who expect it, or at least a quick Uber.

Today, offering over-the-top hospitality “surprises” and comps to visitors is the norm. Short of hiring Phish to play a private show, swag moves the needle increasingly less. Iconic tourism companies known for their rustic allure and reliable sameness can “get away” with not adding bells and whistles, but they are few and far between. With just technology and communications as an example, some of our hotels send personal welcome emails over cold “reservation confirmations,” handy Google calendar updates, RFID everything, and online concierge services pre-arrival; the vast majority of our tourism and retail members are also continuously building passionate communities on social media - even our State Parks offer WIFI at select camping locations. Yet, these innovations are a small part of the equation. I won’t delve into the world of 600-thread count organic cotton towel animals or chilled Vermont-made libations our guests, and admittedly we too, expect. I don’t envy the resort manager or innkeeper who must tread through these marketing and budgetary quagmires - and keep the light on.

While lodging takes first place in visitors’ spending at \$430 million, sectors of Vermont’s tourism economy like retail and dining are 1-2 times more dependent on visitor spending than the national average. What are we doing to keep current, and what do sales and future visits look like in 2020 or 2040? Our state’s workforce is more heavily dependent on tourism dollars than the national average; are we more heavily marketing?

As promised, there are no answers here. But, I am reminded of Town Meeting Day - another hold-back of a past time that Vermont reveres today, against the grain of the nation. At our best, we rally to improve each other’s lots together, across the lines of industries, income or politics. That ethos is relevant across all sectors. We are fiercely independent while being productively interdependent and our future success demands it.

Jen Williams is a communications consultant whose passion and expertise are deeply rooted in travel, sports, wellness and the arts. While New England based, she has worked across 48 states and visited 16 countries in her leisure time. Note: All visitors data and economic figures are from the Vermont Department of Tourism and Marketing Benchmark Study, 2013. Details at www.VermontPartners.org

VCWA:: OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES IN AN INTERCONNECTED WORLD

BY VERA SUSAT, @VCWA

Historically, the state of Vermont has always had limited ethnic diversity. When Ambassador Warren T. Austin established the Vermont Council on World Affairs in the mid-20th century, he was demonstrating his belief that the growth and development of an internationally-focused organization was the best way to advance the national interest and fulfill the noblest aspirations of the U.S. nationhood. With cultural exchange as its core mission, the VCWA has become a platform for cross-cultural communication and understanding. Since its inception, the Council has brought thousands of international visitors into Vermont from around the world.

Over the last few decades, Vermont has welcomed refugees from dozens of countries, increasing the diversity of communities throughout the state and creating new opportunities for global awareness and economic growth. Employers like Birnn Chocolates and Rhino Foods are shining examples of businesses that have prospered while hiring and empowering diverse populations. Business owners across the state have seen their companies benefit from a diverse workforce and from the variety of outlooks and perspectives that this diversity brings. As Vermont becomes increasingly diverse, cultural awareness becomes more immediate and the ability to promote international consciousness becomes more straightforward.

By including organizations and businesses throughout the state in our cultural exchanges, the Vermont Council on World Affairs seeks to build lasting relationships between Vermonters and their contemporaries the world over. Engaging with groups of international visitors has proven beneficial to all those involved through the direct exchange of knowledge, culture, and experiences. Bringing the world to Vermont and Vermont to the world is an ongoing pursuit but, with the increasing diversity in our communities and businesses and the awareness and understanding that follows, Vermonters are beginning to take this charge into their own hands.

WHO ARE WE?

BY SUSAN SMITH, @VERMONTMEETINGS

The Vermont Convention Bureau (VCB) is a division of the Lake Champlain Regional Chamber of Commerce. Our division is charged with representing the state of Vermont to the meetings and conference industry, and we are funded by membership dues and a grant from the Vermont Department of Tourism. We offer a complete range of information, knowledge and assistance about our state and unbiased, neutral information about the state's available services, attractions, hotels and venues. The VCB also organizes local businesses into a destination sales force, by coordinating sales missions, trade shows, campaigns, site tours, e-newsletters and other promotional material.

The VCB experts have been helping meeting planners find the perfect location in Vermont for over 27 years. Our mission is to promote Vermont, focusing on meeting, events and city wide sales. The VCB is responsible for creating public awareness about Vermont and, ultimately, booking the meeting and event business that feeds the economic engine of our state. Because our services are funded by local stakeholders, they are free to the planner.

Why does the state and members of the hospitality community invest in the VCB? Because travel enhances the quality of life in our state by providing jobs, bringing in tax dollars for improvement of services and infrastructure, and attracting facilities like restaurants, shops, festivals, and cultural and sporting venues that cater to both visitors and locals. Meeting and event business is an economic engine and the VCB is a key driver.

In 2014 the VCB worked with a meeting planner who had interest in bringing their group to Vermont. As a result of this sales effort, Jay Peak will host the 61st Annual Porsche Parade in June. Parade is Porsche Club of America's (PCA) annual, weeklong event when thousands of members will travel and explore Vermont in their Porsches — often in Parade-organized driving tours. In addition there are other events such as autocross, concours, time-speed-distance and gimmick rallies, banquets, regional-specific activities, and more. The PCA group will have an economic impact to our state well over \$2 million.

The impact of the sales and marketing efforts of convention bureaus to their communities were recently measured through the Destination Marketing Association International (DMAI) study by Tourism Economics, an Oxford Economics Company, entitled Measuring the Impact of the DMO Group Sales Channel. The findings show nearly 20% of all group room night demand in the U.S. comes through convention bureau sales channels, with 37.5 million group room nights booked for future events and 35.6 million group room nights having occurred in that year.

If you are a member of an association or group and would like to bring your group to Vermont, please call, Susan Smith, Executive Director, 802-860-0606, we will help you welcome your group to Vermont and show off our state!



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UPCOMING EVENT:: 24TH KEYBANK CHAMBER CHALLENGE

Spring is here and golf season is right around the corner. Join us for the 24th Annual KeyBank Chamber Challenge golf tournament on June 9th at Sugarbush. This event will bring together nearly 150 top Vermont business leaders from both our public and private sectors to conduct business and to golf for one magnificent day. Play with your favorite foursome and enjoy a beautiful day on the course, silent auction, and famous lobster awards dinner.

Don't play golf but want to be part of the festivities? Sponsorship opportunities are available to showcase your company's products or services to these top business leaders during the day. Have some fun and sponsor a hole or put your company name on the golf carts. The possibilities are endless. If you would like more information about becoming a sponsor, email Nicole@vermont.org.



Grab your favorite team and sign up at www.vermont.org/24thAnnualKeyBankChallenge.

SPRING TOURISM::

GO WITH THE FLOW

BY MATT BORDEN

DAVID SEAVER PHOTOGRAPHY

Spring in Vermont is a time Mother Nature throws curve balls at visitors and locals alike. One day it's snowing, the next day it's 65 degrees. Then the next day, there's mud, rain, sunshine, sleet and lots of wind. All in the same day! So we in the tourism business have to be on our toes.

Skiing in April is not unusual. Many of the ski resorts extend their season long after most of us have put away our heavy coats. But what happens after the snow has melted? Hiking and fishing? Vermont has hundreds of places to do both and we at the Chamber can help you plan your day.

What if the weather is not cooperating? How about taking in a museum or tour? There are dozens to choose from and we will show you the way.

Perhaps an adult beverage is what you had in mind? We have many wineries, breweries and distilleries distributed in all corners of the state, including the number one brewery in the world. We can give you directions.

Whether you're a local or from out of state, spring in Vermont is a very fluid time and the tourism ambassadors at the Chamber are experts on how to help you go with the flow.

DAIRY PRODUCERS CONFERENCE:: SUSTAINABILITY & INNOVATION

Hundreds of dairy farmers from New England and New York gathered at the 17th annual Vermont Dairy Producers Conference in Burlington to hear from a panel of experts about emerging technology and innovative strategies to ensure dairy farms continue to be a vibrant part of the local economy.

"It's critical that our growing population continues to have access to local, nutritious and affordable dairy products," said Les Pike of Keewaydin Farm in Stowe. "To do this farmers continually look for innovative ways to be more efficient and sustainable." Jude L. Capper specializes in food system sustainability, and says that today's modern dairy farms have reduced their carbon footprint by two-thirds since the 1940s. "Sustainability doesn't only mean natural, or organic, or pasture-fed. Sustainable means caring for our animals and land to make a nutritious product," Capper said.

Governor Peter Shumlin and Secretary of Agriculture Chuck Ross thanked dairy farmers for their contributions

to the state. Governor Shumlin noted that during his administration, 5,000 jobs have been added in value-added agriculture. His remarks were echoed by Ross, who said dairy farmers bring \$3 million per day into Vermont.

In addition to highlighting the importance of Dairy to our economy, the conference also focused on innovation. Dr. Ray Nebel, Vice President of Technical Programs at Select Sires, talked to farmers about emerging technologies. He described new technology that allows farmers to monitor a cow's health, rest and eating patterns - data that is increasingly valuable to a productive farm.



Over 300 dairy farmers & industry professionals gathered at 17th VT Dairy Producers Conference



Vermont-Quebec Enterprise Initiative

On February 18th, the Vermont Quebec Enterprise Initiative, a division of the Lake Champlain Regional Chamber of Commerce, hosted a meeting between business, education and political leaders along with the leadership of the Federation of Chambers of Commerce of Quebec. This meeting was a direct outcome of the Memorandum of Understanding that was signed between the two organizations in October of 2015.

Ms. Francoise Bertrand, President & CEO of the Federation of Chambers of Commerce of Quebec (FCCQ), led a small delegation to Vermont to learn more about Vermont's strong network of workforce training programs and to participate in a small, targeted meeting with selected technology companies from both sides of the border.

The first sessions focused exclusively on how Vermont provides workforce training in a way that is cost-effective and tailored to employers' needs. Commerce Secretary Patricia Moulton discussed Vermont's employer-friendly and responsive workforce delivery system. These partnerships extend beyond state government to our academic partners such as Vermont Technical College and our regional technical centers.

The afternoon session was organized specifically for IT companies from Vermont and Quebec to explore partnerships – one of the key sectors that was identified in the MOU. The technology sector has been identified by economic development professionals as an area where Vermont is recognized and can compete on a global basis. A nascent technology corridor is beginning to form between Vermont and Montreal and it is a strategic advantage that we must capitalize on. The Vermont Technology Alliance and Champlain College were a key partners in organizing this session.

Given its success, the Chamber will be leading a group of IT companies to the Montreal region in June to continue to develop this talent and business channel. Already, companies that attended the meeting have been discussing collaborative working arrangements and there is likely more good news to follow.

DID YOU KNOW?

- As a member of the Chamber, your employees have the ability to take full advantage of Burlington Young Professionals (BYP) events and programs. To learn more, visit www.vermont.org/byp

- There are over 1 million views per year on www.vermont.org. You can post upcoming events to our calendar. www.vermont.org/events

- The Chamber has an online learning platform called Global Classroom. It has over 1200 courses and videos to enhance your skills in Technology, Business Development, and Career Readiness. Visit www.lcrrconline.globalclassroomportal.com to start learning today!

- The Chamber is your partner in reaching over 13.7 million visitors to our state. We offer print and digital advertising opportunities for your company, seasonally or year round. Want to know more? Visit www.vermont.org/chamber/members/marketing



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As we head into spring, we take this time to reflect back on our adoption of three youth programs after Navicate ceased operations in January of 2015, and the first full school year of managing these programs. First, we have been very impressed by the interest of our high school youth in developing the skills that they know they will need to become well-rounded and ready for the workforce. We have had the privilege of working with students from the following high schools: Burlington, South Burlington, Essex, Colchester and Winooski, as well as, clients and staff from Spectrum Youth and Family Services. We have had meetings and developed relationships with the Administrative staff at each of these schools, and the response to having Chamber representation in the schools has been unanimous...they need someone to help bridge the small gap that exists between the schools and the business community.

We have been welcomed with open arms and have had numerous productive discussions around what the needs of the schools are in placing student internships, as well as, what we know the business community needs to make this placement a reality. We are able to bring business representatives into the school to talk to the students about expectations, and take the students out into the community to learn first-hand about what to expect, and the students are completely engaged in learning all they can to better their future.

We live in a community that truly cares about our kids, and it is evident in every conversation that we have with our members. Everyone is worried about the future of our workforce and the very real possibility of students leaving the state, but from what we've seen over the past school year, we have also seen the true desire of students to find a way to stay, so they, too, can raise their families in Vermont.

LAUNCHVT COLLEGIATE::

PROVIDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR VT COLLEGE STUDENTS

BY KATIE TAYLOR, @LAUNCHVT

The entrepreneurial spirit is alive and well on Vermont's college campuses. Fifteen students brought their ideas and enthusiasm to the Alumni Auditorium at Champlain College on a Friday afternoon in February to compete for \$10,000 in cash prizes and a coveted spot in the LaunchVT Final Competition on May 5th. After three years of running LaunchVT, the Chamber partnered with eight colleges and universities from across the state to host the first-ever LaunchVT Collegiate Competition on February 19th. A single team represented each participating institution, many chosen through internal school competitions held prior to the event. The teams were:

- Ampitheater from Vermont Technical College, with a device allowing for the storage and playback of thousands of media files in multiple formats
- Bear Mountain Maple, from Castleton University, with 100% certified organic maple syrup targeted toward a European audience
- Brother Blueprints, from Norwich University, with locally-made craftworks using repurposed wood
- Campus Connect, from St. Michael's College, with an app connecting students to each other for activities like purchasing/selling books and sharing favorite recipes
- Joyryde, from Middlebury College, with an app that discourages distracted driving by offering incentives to drivers
- Thermouse, from Champlain College, with an ergonomic, fully-customizable gaming mouse
- Tiller, from Johnson State College, with a review-based app that provides improved access to local businesses
- Vermont Supply Crates, from University of Vermont, with a hand-picked selection of local products delivered to the doors of customers around the country

The competitors were focused but also took time to network and offer each other words of encouragement. A panel of five judges evaluated the 10-minute pitches and asked questions: Jo Bradley, CEO, Vermont Economic Development Authority; Ken Merritt, Partner, Merritt & Merritt & Moulton; Marguerite Dibble, CEO/President, Gametheory; David Bradbury, President and Seed Fund Manager, Vermont Center for Emerging Technologies; and Emily Piper, Client Manager, Agilion. After almost two hours of pitches, Thermouse won first prize, taking home \$7500 and securing a spot in the LaunchVT Final Competition. First prize winners Matthew Giles and Cullen Jemison said after winning, "We consider this a really vital step in moving toward our goal of manufacturing this product in Vermont." The pair was the only cross-institution team, with Matthew Giles competing as a freshman at Champlain College and Cullen Jemison as a sophomore at UVM. Joyryde out of Middlebury College took home the second prize of \$2500 and the \$500 third prize was awarded to Vermont Supply Crates from the University of Vermont.

Thank you to our sponsors: VtSBDC, LCRCC, BTV Ignite, Castleton University, Champlain College, Johnson State College, Middlebury College, Norwich University, St. Michael's College, University of Vermont, and Vermont Technical College.



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