

Designing and Marketing Low Season Tourism Experiences





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Who should read this manual?



Any professional of a public or private sector tourism organisation that wants to be more dynamic and entrepreneurial.

We've written this manual for people who want to do things better, to experiment and to learn.

We know change is tricky and we live in uncertain times where things around us are changing too fast. Key source markets have dried up and businesses have to reinvent themselves. Creativity and gumption are essential to survive these days; risk is a daily occurrence.

Increasingly, a focus on low season demand is more important than ever for tourism venues to survive. We offer you operational tools, down to earth examples, and tips on how to shift your hospitality and tourism business from delivering products and services, to offering year-round experiences.

Give yourself some time to think what kind of changes your business needs.

01

Products, make way for experiences.



Because travellers are both rational and emotional beings, an experience should aim to stimulate the five senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste) and/or arouse positive emotions (happiness, fun, surprise, joy, contentment...). To design such experiences, you need to be clear what you want your customers to achieve when they are with you.

Products are so yesterday, and customers want to engage with your offering with all their senses.

Academics have investigated why, when, and how experiences are sought and created. Economists, sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, and neuroscientists have all contributed to inform the transition for international brands.

Companies such as Apple, Microsoft, Nike, and Starbucks have integrated into their management process their intention to provide a participative and customisable experience rather than a finished product to customers. We'd like to share with you some of their learning, so that you can apply it to your leisure and tourism business.

Because travellers are both rational and emotional beings, an experience should aim to stimulate the five senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste) and/or arouse positive emotions (happiness, fun, surprise, joy, contentment...). To design such experiences, you need to be clear what you want your customers to achieve when they are with you.



What is a sustainable tourism experience?

It is active, participatory, authentic, and respectful.



Sustainable experiences convey a genuine willingness of travellers to encounter authentic and memorable events. Most travellers are losing interest in destination-based, pre-packaged tourism. They want to enjoy bespoke and unique experiences they can share.

An experience is a product or a service that triggers **pleasure**, or positive **emotions** or **senses**, enables the acquisition of new manual or intellectual **skills** and/or fosters beneficial **interactions** with others.

Experiences can be sustainable when they respectfully address the **needs** of various stakeholders such as visitors, the industry and host communities while improving long-term economic outcomes, socio-cultural benefits, and environmental preservation.

Sustainable experiences convey a **genuine** willingness of travellers to encounter **authentic** and **memorable** events. Most travellers are losing interest in destination-based, pre-packaged tourism. They want to enjoy **bespoke** and unique experiences they can share. Thus, there are as many possible experiences as there are travellers and the same provider can offer multiple different experiences.

An increasing number of people seek sustainable experiences. Some prioritise

their **wellbeing** via the practice of outdoor activities or detox holidays or days out. Others look for fun during special festivals and events that celebrate the natural and cultural local resources. Others seek to live like a local and benefit from unique tips to travel off the beaten track. Others want to **learn** or improve a manual skill (cooking lesson) or an intellectual skill (meditation) that will contribute to **transforming** them for the long term.

A sustainable experience is a genuine and special event that is anchored in daily life, highly **exciting** and **participative**. It is an experience that **respects** host communities and their cultural and natural heritage. A sustainable experience targets, first and foremost, people's wellbeing and then it benefits the environment where it takes place.

Sustainable experiences do not have to be expensive, but customers may be willing to pay more if sustainable offerings fulfil their needs better than other experiences.



Engage your customer's five senses.

Experiences are multi-sensory.



Multi-sensory experiences are inclusive and accessible because they provide a range of opportunities to engage, which allows for individuals with disabilities, or limitations in some senses, to have their senses aroused.

A multi-sensory, integrated approach is a key component of experience design since sensory experiences influence decision-making, brand experience and destination imagery. A person's perception of an experience is determined by whether their five senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste) are aroused.

As a rule of thumb, the more stimulation there is the more chance you have to provide a successful experience that reaches more people, more deeply, with more lasting

effects. But, equally, you can stimulate senses by deliberately encouraging users to enjoy the darkness or the silence, for example.

Multi-sensory experiences are **inclusive** and **accessible** because they provide a range of opportunities to engage, which allows for individuals with disabilities, or limitations in some senses, to have their senses aroused.



Aesthetics, colour and light are the primary contributors to experience perception, so it is crucial to control the setting where an experience occurs, particularly if it is outside. For example, poorly-maintained paths could impact negatively on a customer's perception of aesthetics.



Experiences can be enhanced by **music**, and other natural or artificial **sounds**, provided there is a link with the theme.



Textures improve a traveller's engagement with their surroundings so touching trees, interacting with elements, or having different textures on an educational excursion are all good ideas. New technology provides opportunities for remote experiences through 3D touch/haptics.



Odours and **tastes** are essential to gastronomic and tasting experiences, but they are also used increasingly in museums and attractions to enhance visitor engagement.



We use our local and seasonal assets as motivation for a visit during the low season.

Laurence Francart is Director of the Compiègne Tourist Office (FR).



What we do:

We know there is a strong desire from visitors to rediscover what nature has to offer in its primary form so we create a unique experience, with special discoveries from Autumn to Spring, by setting up a wild-plant themed tour with a forest expert within the Compiègne forest.

How we do it:

Following an excursion with a sylvotherapist guide in the Compiègne forest, we decided to explore the idea of creating excursions that would highlight the unique discoveries that can be made in our local natural environment during the low season.

The forest of Compiègne, being the fourth largest forest in France, gives a real treasure of biodiversity just waiting to be discovered and interpreted in a playful way. The range of experiences that we offer goes from "forest bathing with friends" to "botanical treasure



Our Tips:

The key to the success of such an experience is its fun aspect. Few holidaymakers want to feel like they are going to school on a tour, but most are looking for memorable experiences while learning interesting, and sometimes even practical, tips.

hunting with the family" to "discovering the culinary flavours of wild plants".

With each season offering a specific set of accessible wild plants and unique surroundings in which to set different experiences, the forest offers a wealth of opportunities perfectly aligned with our desires to return to a deeper connection with, and understanding of, nature. By highlighting the particularities of a season through this type of product, we give visitors a clear motivation to visit during the low season amongst others.

We aim to make the experiences unique and personal; for example, on our "Discovering the Culinary Flavours of Wild Plants" excursion, we provide a guidebook with plant cards to help them in their research, with a few blank pages at the end to record the guidebook's "secret" recipes.



Experiences are co-created.

People are at the centre of experiences.



- **Hospitality and tourism businesses:** front-office workers such as receptionists, guides and waiters are those who engage the most with travellers. It is crucial that they provide bespoke services and answer various needs with flexibility rather than provide the same experience to everyone.
- **Other businesses:** stakeholders (such as artisans, crafters, artists, farmers, local shops and foresters) have an important role to play through their interactions with travellers.
- **Locals:** travellers may want to experience an off-the-beaten track existence and live like a local. Airbnb experiences and the various Greeters networks are examples where such an interaction is possible.
- **Travellers:** travellers exchange information and tips before, during and after their trips. Promoting that travellers share their experiences about you on social networks, forums and on-site, is fundamental to your success.



The quality of interactions between travellers and stakeholders at the destination directly affects the travellers' overall satisfaction levels.

Driven by a sense of meaningfulness, travellers want to engage with local people to encounter authentic experiences. Sometimes it is important that the experience itself is genuine while sometimes what matters is that the relationships between people are genuine even though the experience is staged.

The quality of interactions between travellers and stakeholders at the destination directly affects the travellers' overall satisfaction levels. Although destination management organisations wish to control the value chain to maximise the destination imagery and ensure tourist satisfaction, this may be harder for them to do with experiences due to the variety of stakeholders involved.



We bring placemaking benefits, address seasonality and create a sense of pride and belonging.

Melanie Sensicle is the former CEO of VisitDurham, and one of the promoters of Lumiere Durham (UK).



and public spaces, changing the way we experience our urban surroundings.

The installations are of world class quality, and many are new commissions with artists invited for site visits prior to making the work. This means that the same installation can have both aesthetic value as well as cultural resonance. Through the commissioning programme BRILLIANT, new and emerging local and national artists are supported to develop their ideas and their installations are showcased in the main festival, alongside internationally renowned artists. A Learning and Participation programme engages with the local community who participate in the creation of several of the artworks, which adds to the sense of community ownership.



Our Tips:

Develop low season activities with strong community involvement to ensure a deep significance for local stakeholders, who can engage more in low seasons than they would be able to in busy summer periods. In doing so, you can create a collective sense of pride and belonging for what is achieved.

What we do:

Over 10 years, Lumiere has attracted more than one million visitors to Durham, and in 2019 generated an economic impact of over £8m. Commissioned by Durham County Council and produced by renowned arts production company Artichoke, it is also made possible thanks to the commitment of the local community to many aspects of its planning and operation.

How we do it:

Durham County Council had the ambition to commission a cultural event that showcased the city to an international audience, that would extend the visitor season and generate a sense of belonging and pride amongst the local community. To succeed, the event also needed to create a sense of partnership in both public and private spaces. Lumiere Durham was introduced and is now the UK's leading light festival, inviting artists to create works that reimagine familiar buildings

The festival has also reached those that cannot visit in person thanks to extensive media coverage, and the documentation of all installations through film and photography made available through Lumiere and Artichoke social and digital channels, as well as Virtual Lumiere, a digital 3D model of Durham Cathedral with an interactive feature that lets users create their own artwork to share via their social network.

The impacts from the festival are captured in a comprehensive independent evaluation that includes an analysis of economic impact, including AVE of media coverage, and surveys of local businesses, residents and participants, artists and visitors; these show benefits across the region that extend beyond the month of November due to the lengthy year-round preparations. The event is biennial due to the logistics of organising such an extensive event including engaging world class artists, and to drive anticipation.



Why low season experiences?

Because healthy year-round business helps you and your destination thrive.



A significant percentage of tourism and hospitality businesses has closed for the winter, particularly in rural areas. Others reduce their opening days (limiting to weekends only) or reduce their opening hours. The rest has remained open but reduced the activities and services they offer, and the personnel they employ, to reduce operating costs. In the future, no business will be able to survive with summer trade only, even less so as a result of COVID-19.

Seasonality occurs for three very valid and real reasons:

- **Natural factors**
(weather dependency, climate, location and access)
- **Demand factors**
(holiday patterns, availability of leisure time, social norms)
- **Supply factors**
(available activities, trading patterns)



The approximate seasonality for rural tourism businesses is 10-15% of demand in January to March, 25-30% April to June, 30-50% July to September and 15-20% October to December.

Low season experiences cannot be exact replicas of summer experiences only sold to people who accept worse weather. Equally, you don't want simply to sell low season experiences to those customers who are only willing to buy them because you offer discounts. You need to find something unique about your low season that will help you design experiences that are particularly attractive.



We put people at the heart of our experience.

Cécile Davidovics is the Owner of the B&B Le Clos des Tilleuls (FR).

What we do:

During the low season, visitors can be wary of unpredictable weather conditions. By focusing on human interaction and offering an indoor space to create experiences, we take this concern out of the equation and give our visitors a reason to stay at our accommodation rather than going elsewhere. We target families by offering a room that can accommodate a couple and three children (rather than the usual two). We have developed communal living spaces that encourage human interaction, regardless of the weather, and that promote family activities available in the low season.

How we do it:

We have a clientele from October to May who are primarily looking for a change of environment for

a few days, to take a break from the routine (and chores!) of everyday life and to enjoy their children without constraints.

This is exactly what we have built into our offer; the chance to share good times indoors, with generous and pleasant living spaces, a large table in the living/dining room, board games, equipment for children and a play area on the mezzanine. We also offer baking workshops for young and old. Outside there is a large garden, a trampoline, direct access to the castle park with its deer, which can be fed as a family, and the forest of Compiègne for re-energising walks even in the midst of winter.



Our Tips:

It is essential to identify your unique selling proposition, and direct your efforts toward building a relevant and complete offer for a key target market. Note also that anything to do with animals (nature park, educational farm) is an attraction that works in the low-season and a huge success with families.





Be proactive in managing your seasonality challenges.

Treat seasonality as a business risk.

Spend time understanding why your product/market combination is seasonal and consider options to reduce the business risks arising from seasonality:

Avoid

Change plans to circumvent the problem, such as identifying new markets that you can serve that either complement your current markets or that are not seasonal.

Control / mitigate / modify / reduce

Reduce the likelihood of winter conditions to negatively impact your business. Identify ways to upgrade your offering by addressing some of the shortcomings in low season, such as weatherproofing your current services and investing in infrastructure.

Accept

Assume that your experiences will have limited demand due to uncontrollable events; reduce prices to attract demand; reduce operating costs to reduce losses; and budget the remaining cost via a contingency budget line.

Transfer / Share

Outsource a portion of the risk to a third party (or parties). For example, outsource an activity, such as running an event, to an expert company.



©L'œil de Paco

Are you tired of mostly *accepting* the risk, rather than finding ways to *avoid*, *control* or *transfer* it? Then it's time to get creative.



We communicate year-round dynamism to boost low season occupancy.

Alix De Lauzanne is the owner of the guest house Villa du Chatelet (FR).



What we do:

The Villa du Chatelet is a property full of history, having been built for the internationally renowned composer Léo Delibes. Our wish today is to make this house live as fully as it did at the time of its famous patron. As a result, we have a high occupancy rate throughout the year.

How we do it:

Firstly, we ensure that the musical and artistic heritage of the villa is kept alive by welcoming artists from all over the world to perform in the privacy of our living room, mainly between October and March, for a local audience.

Then, as much by personal passion as by conviction of the human link that can be created around gastronomy, we regularly lead cooking workshops for residents and visitors, or as special events. We offer table d'hôte for our residents to further enhance the comfortable feeling of "being a guest at a friend's home".

Lately, we have been working with companies to host seminars and create a team-building offer. These are particularly popular during the winter months of December and the start of the new year.

All of these activities are well promoted on our website, supported by quality photos of our accommodation in all seasons of the year, illustrating each season's own appeal.

It is not uncommon to hear from our guests that they have booked a room in our establishment because of our table d'hôte offer or because of the concerts, which they do not go to but which are, for them, representative of the 'hospitable spirit' of the villa and its hosts.



Our Tips:

Invest in unique experiences to be noticed. Activities such as artistic performances, and even sometimes our table d'hôte, are not intended to be financially profitable. They are usually not profitable as a stand-alone activity, but they do contribute significantly to the quality image of our accommodation, which in turn increases our occupancy rate all year round.





Task 1:

What do you want to achieve?

Prioritise and develop plans to achieve your objectives.

Simply wanting to grow your business is not enough, you need to be clear about what you want to achieve. Here are five common objectives:

Generate first time sales.

Which markets are available, or more easily identifiable, for low season and what type of incentive do you need to attract those markets?

Increase customer loyalty and repeat sales.

What do you need to do to tempt past customers back? Do you need to remind them of a favourite experience, provide a new experience or offer a discount?

Increase the volume of the same service purchased.

Your target may be to get customers to stay longer or to buy three souvenirs instead of two.

Increase the number of services purchased together.

Bundling different services allows you to tailor-make experiences and to upsell. It also makes planning the experience easier for your customer. Who can you partner with to cross-sell?

Increase the size of the group.

Your strategy may be to get loyal customers to return, but with family and friends. What incentives can you provide your loyal customers to do so?

Can you think of a sixth objective that is specific to you, that we did not include?

It is best not to say “I want them all”, because each objective requires a different set of actions. Instead, prioritise these objectives based on: 1) feasibility, and 2) importance. When you brainstorm ideas on what to do, try to relate your ideas clearly to these objectives.

02

Different seasons, different markets.



The time you invest in learning about different markets will be directly proportional to your ability to reduce your seasonality and your understanding of how to be more inclusive of different groups that may have been inadvertently side lined.

High and low season customers are different. They seek leisure and travel experiences for different purposes; they seek different benefits, search suppliers differently and will be satisfied with different types and levels of service. So why do we often treat them the same?

The time you invest in learning about different markets will be directly proportional to your ability to reduce your seasonality and your understanding of how to be more inclusive of different groups that may have been inadvertently side lined.

Use the new knowledge you gain to adapt your offer to different types of customer and to balance changes in demand.



We progressively diversify our product and markets.

Alexandre Tisné-Versailles is the Marketing and Development Director at the pirate-themed, historic monument of Le Château des Enigmes (FR).



What we do:

Starting from a single product (a themed treasure hunt in a castle), we developed our offer with complementary products (unusual accommodation and an escape game) to generate activity all year round by targeting different audiences.

How we do it:

We started with the acquisition of a castle as a backdrop to bring to life our themed treasure hunts. Despite the enormous success of this first offer, we mainly attracted families, who are subject to strong seasonality.

Now, we add complementary activities to reach a wider range of visitors throughout the year. Firstly, we decided to exploit the full potential of the 9 hectares of parkland belonging to the château by creating tree houses. The success was immediate, reaching a >90% occupancy rate all year round from the first year! In addition to the family market, the tree houses allowed us to reach young



Our Tips:

Consider the potential of your site and its surroundings as a whole. Use these resources to consider product and market diversification from a complementary perspective: use your expertise, understand your target market and ensure that new products can complement each other, not compete.

professionals in their 30s as well as the 50-60 year old population, particularly when sold as a holiday package. The next step was to target the 18-30 year old market, as well as business clientele.

Because of our expertise in fun games, and our vast indoor and outdoor site, escape games were an obvious choice. Not only did this new activity take off immediately, but it also allowed us to generate additional business with companies, from November to February, for team-building activities.

Packaging services allowed us to move from the usual half-day visits to market 2-day/1-night stays: one activity per day plus one night. A win-win situation.

It is not necessary to start everything at the same time. Focus first on your core idea and expertise, build awareness, and then evolve as you go along, depending on financial resources and the evolution of the demand.



Locals first.

Your key to winter survival is to have a healthy, regular local clientele.



Selling to your local market is quite literally the opposite. If they don't know your business they certainly know your competitors and they have a keen sense of what's good value for money.

Selling to first time customers and repeat customers is very different.

First time customers rely on third party marketing and website searches, so you are likely to pay a commission to attract them. The products they buy will be stereotypical of what they perceive to be the "must do" attractions in your destination. As a result,



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they will follow a pre-specified route, staying in the most popular locations. They are more predictable, but also harder to influence, and they normally have a pre-specified time or day to leave your destination. They are more likely to visit as a group. They can be highly price sensitive but also use price as a sign of quality because they cannot judge quality in advance as they have no prior experience.

Selling to your local market is quite literally the opposite. If they don't know your business they certainly know your competitors and they have a keen sense of what's good value for money. This means they will recognise quality as they can distinguish between fake and real products. They are more likely to seek variety, but will also develop a list of favourites (cafes, restaurants, places to visit...). They are more likely to visit independently and more flexibly. For this reason, you are less likely to pay for a third party to bring them to you so, instead, you can devote your marketing budget to your social media activity and other locally-focused forms of marketing, and focus on strengthening customer relationships.

The local market is more likely to repeat, recommend and upgrade. The person that visits you in a group of friends today can return for a family reunion next month or book for a team building retreat next year. Therefore, you need to show your local markets how you have multiple offerings, to show that they can do something different when they come back.

Your reputation depends on what your local community thinks of you. How you welcome the local community to your premises says a lot about your business and how you want to be remembered.



We change our market priorities in the low season from tourists to locals.

Françoise Le Moine is the Director of the Beauport Abbey (FR).



What we do:

During the low season, we move from a “tourist” event calendar to a cultural programme for our local communities, as well as making our premises available for community workshops.

How we do it:

We increasingly became aware that tourists had appropriated the heritage that ultimately belongs to the locals, who end up detaching themselves from it rather than being its primary beneficiaries. We have therefore recalibrated our approach and budget management to optimise our summer income and reinvest in the low season.

Instead of spending most of our budget on grand communication campaigns nationwide and a host of



Our Tips:

To make this in-depth change of approach, it is essential to convince local authorities to reorient political discourse and funding logics away from the promotion of the territory’s assets in high season towards an awareness of the value and public utility of a heritage assimilated and carried by its residents and, thus, achieve a better balance and an optimised return on their investment for all, and all year round.

big name acts to attract visitors over the summer season, when in reality we are already suffering from over-tourism at that time of the year, we work on our low season offering by creating an inspiring cultural programme.

During winter, we reorganise the space that is usually set up for large concerts, to instead have smaller workshop areas. This allows us to host and run reflective workshops on attachment to the living environment through the preservation and enhancement of its cultural and natural heritage. We support projects for the transmission of traditional, local know-how, such as the rehabilitation of a wicker grove from the planting of willows to the pruning of wicker and the art of basketry.



Encourage repeat visits.

Low season is the time for loyalty.



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Provide discount vouchers for next purchases that are time-limited, for example, in your café or the car park, so that customers are encouraged to make more regular repeat visits.

Think ahead

Businesses tend to get fewer first-time visitors in winter and, instead, rely on repeat markets. Hence, look for ways to encourage customers to return. In particular, incentivise loyalty of your most valued customers. Here are a few ideas.

Tell customers what to look forward to. On their way out of your venue, tell customers what's on next week (or next month).

Create an annual pass. Many visitor attractions nowadays have annual membership or their one-day ticket is valid for multiple entries. You can further learn from the techniques used in leisure centres to manage demand: create an autumn to spring membership, a midweek membership, or a 9 to 3pm membership.

Create a sense of belonging. Create a club of regular users; give them status and reward their loyalty with new offers, such as being able to experience things before others do (from seeing an exhibition the night before it opens to being invited to sample a new cake or dish before it is added to the menu). This is, in itself, a great way for you to test new ideas with a more forgiving audience that will give you feedback.

Run clubs. You can have a parent and toddler group, a grandparents and grandchildren group, or work with specific community groups to increase occupancy of your premises; elderly loneliness is fast increasing and opportunities to meet socially help immensely. Weekly groups at low occupancy periods provide groups with a sense of ownership and belonging to your venue and, often, meeting at a less crowded time is beneficial to these target groups.

Discount or upsell. Provide discount vouchers for next purchases that are time-limited, for example, in your café or the car park, so that customers are encouraged to make more regular repeat visits. Provide upgrades for visits Monday to Thursday (e.g. buy cake and you get a coffee for free) to encourage higher expenditure. Offer a large group discount or an upgrade. Make sure that the discounts are on items that have a low cost of production.

Provide loyalty gifts. Loyal customers or annual members could be given a birthday gift, in the form of one free pass to bring a friend or a recommendation voucher to invite someone with a discount.



We create a sense of community by gamifying the discovery of local heritage.

Laurence Pourageaud is the Quality and Geocaching Coordinator at Charentes Tourisme (FR).



© Charentes Tourisme



© Malika TURIN@CRT Limousine



Our Tips:

The quality of the routes is absolutely essential to the success of this initiative. Every year, more and more cities and tourist offices apply for the creation of Terra Aventura routes and only institutions with particularly interesting content are selected. It is also important to offer only free tours, with no commercial commitments; although suggestions can be made to encourage visits to sites or museums, the clues should always remain in the public domain. Beneficially, 50% of users say they spend at least one night away from home on each tour.

What we do:

We co-developed a region-wide treasure hunt that invites users to venture into the most unexpected corners of the destination, in complete autonomy, through a geocaching mobile application. The fact that none of our hunts are season-dependent combined with the added benefit that users can explore them in their own time, means that we see increased activity from November to March.

How we do it:

The Destination Management Organisation (DMO) of Limousin thought about how best to get visitors to radiate throughout the region, including to the most remote communities, and how to encourage repeat visits throughout the year. They introduced Terra Aventura, which is a life-size treasure hunt, for young and old, run autonomously by a telephone application using geocaching. It consists of looped circuits from 1 to 10 km of geolocated enigmas that invite

the discovery of particular sites, with a reward for each successfully completed cache. Terra Aventura is enhanced with its own fictional and endearing characters, the "Poi'z".

As a result, a strong user community has been created around the game, with players setting ambitious targets in completing as many caches as possible, thus pushing for repeat visits, including during the low season, and to collect as many "Poi'z" badges as possible that they in turn compare and share both online and offline, nourishing its own marketing buzz.

Today, the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region has 500 Terra Aventura routes throughout its territory, with 3 million users annually. Each city/Tourism Office contributes financially to the creation of its Terra Aventura routes, which are first verified by the counties DMOs and then coordinated by the regional DMO Nouvelle-Aquitaine.



We offer a bundle of activities to promote low season travel.

David Isern i Casanovas is the General Manager of Cerdanya Resort (Spain) and an innovative eco-tourism entrepreneur.



©Cerdanya Resort



©Cerdanya Resort

What we do:

We offer “Cerdanya Kids” - a bundle of 50 nature challenges for families to do together and have fun in nature. The idea is based on the concept of the UK National Trust’s “50 things to do before you are 11¾” challenge. This family activity aims to increase loyalty, satisfaction and word of mouth, and also to reduce seasonality in our resort.

How we do it:

The challenges are based on our understanding of a happy and wholesome childhood, such as flying a kite, stroking a donkey (from our farm) or making a den in the forest. This might seem very normal but the busy city life of today often disconnects us from nature.

All the activities can be done locally to the resort, not requiring transport and the activities are completed as a family without requiring staff involvement, hence they are free for us to offer.

Families love the variety of activities, and also love receiving prizes: a baseball cap after 5 challenges, a medal pin after 10 challenges, a T-shirt after 25 challenges and a night of adventure in a yurt for the whole family after completing all 50 challenges.

The family passport has no cost, since the purpose of this exercise is not to increase expenditure per day, but to increase repeat visitation, satisfaction and word of mouth. Completing all 50 challenges requires multiple visits to the resort.

The passport has worked specially well to increase repeat visitation in low season, which for us is spring and autumn, since in winter we have demand for ski tourism. 10 challenges were specifically designed to be best achieved in the spring (identifying certain flowers) and another 10 in autumn (e.g. making an “angel” but in autumn leaves rather than in the snow, which is more typical).



©Cerdanya Resort



Our Tips:

Identify experiences that have emotional and entertainment value to your customers but that cost little for you to offer, and design them to promote visits during low season.



Aim for equality, diversity and inclusion.

The world is a mosaic: design experiences for every market.

Is your business implicitly biased by targeting white, Christian, middle class, heterosexual couples with two children, who will drive and have no disabilities? You may feel uncomfortable with this question and yet the photography you use in your website speaks volumes.

We often think of stereotypical consumers and design products for their needs. Think about the age, ethnicity, gender, ability, sexuality and religion of the consumers you want to attract. Targeting a diverse community is not only the right thing to do, it also gives you excellent business opportunities. Nowadays, not being inclusive is a greater risk. Consumers want brands to be braver at showing more diverse people and they want adverts to accurately reflect society.

Half of UK consumers are more likely to buy from brands that show diversity, as they find this increases trust. Half of consumers stop buying from brands that do not represent their values and are turned off by adverts that negatively stereotype. This increases substantially for any minority groups.

Remember that there exists a range of disabilities and most of them are not visible: one in five UK consumers has a disability and this market has more opportunities to travel in the low season. Companies that demonstrate disability confidence achieve over 25% higher revenue.

When aiming for diversity and inclusion, think about the services you provide to this market and how you communicate these. For example, in most rural areas, it is often difficult to find halal food, which excludes

Muslim communities. Individuals with disabilities may feel uncomfortable to book with you when your disability statement is superficial or hidden on your website. You may provide directions based on the assumption that your target market owns a car, which discriminates against lower earning groups. Your pricing of family entry tickets may discriminate against divorced, separated or same sex couples because discounts are commonly based on the principle that a family is heterosexual with two children. The list is endless.



One in five UK consumers has a disability and this market has more opportunities to travel in the low season. Companies that demonstrate disability confidence achieve over 25% higher revenue.



©Kent Downs AONB and North Downs Way National Trail



We design our facilities to offer inclusive experiences.

Sonja Gregory is the co-owner of The Hytte, an accessible self-catering cottage in Northumberland (UK).

What we do:

We ensure our cottage offers the highest level of accessible enjoyment and entertainment. Despite our distance from most target markets, we have exceptional year-round occupancy and a hugely loyal client base. Our occupancy rate is over 80%, compared to a regional average of 55% annual occupancy for self-catering properties.

How we do it:

We design our holiday experience to allow whole families to have a good time, without excluding those with learning or physical disabilities, or the elderly who will be naturally less mobile but will not think of themselves as disabled. We aim for effortless and convenient enjoyment.

Our open plan cottage is designed to offer the chance for everyone to be together, not separating those in the kitchen from the group conversation. The kitchen units, including the space under the sink, are designed to accommodate wheelchairs, while the low gradient ramps and sympathetic handrails are helpful and unobtrusive.



Our Tips:

We understand that groups want to travel to spend time together. We have found that the weather and time of year are no object, providing that the facilities we offer enable that “togetherness”. Design your experience so that customers feel they can all partake in an effortless way and irrespective of the time of year.

But it's the fact that the whole group can participate in the fun that sells the place. Our outdoor sauna and jacuzzi make a big difference because they give everyone the chance, regardless of any disabilities, to partake in enjoying the outdoors.

We are fully aware that saunas and jacuzzies consume lots of energy so we have gone to great lengths to reduce our environmental impacts through a grass roof, a high level of insulation, an electric vehicle charging point and sourcing green energy for our site. Customers that use above “average” electricity are charged for any extra units used as “Pay Back” and these charges are donated to the Northumberland National Park Environment Association and The *Great North Air Ambulance*.

We provide details of local wheelchair friendly restaurants and tourist attractions so that the fun continues beyond our property. All this information is communicated on our website so customers can know what to look forward to.





Task 2:

Identify complementary markets.

Diversify your markets and learn how to respond to their different needs.

We have learned that low season visitors tend to be more local, stay for a shorter period of time and book late (or just turn up). They are also likely to be repeat visitors and therefore seek variety, compared to high season visitors that are more likely to be first time buyers.

Does it sound like a management nightmare? Not necessarily, but it does require you to be more flexible and it can provide new opportunities for you. Working with different markets also reduces your risk of dependency on a single market, which makes your business more resilient.

Prepare a day calendar, from your opening to your closing times. Write down which type of

customers you expect at each hour and what percentage of your maximum available capacity they represent.

Now do the same for different days of the week, noting any particular differences. Finally, do the same for November to March, noting specific monthly activity.

Next, colour code the different segments (in your day, week or months) according to the capacity figures: red for under 50%, amber for 50-75% and green for above 75%.

Make a list of the types of customers you get currently and group them in two columns: Group A are those that can change the time

and day when they come and Group B are those that cannot. For Group A: return to our list of tactics to encourage them to return and think how you can use these tactics to change the times at which your customers visit you, away from green (above 75% occupancy) times, towards amber and red times. For Group B: identify actions you can do to increase the number of people at that same time.

In addition, brainstorm who might be in a Group C: potential customers that are currently not patronising your business. Identify how you are not meeting their needs and what changes you would need to make to do so. Also consider how compatible they would be with your Group A and Group B clients that visit you at the same time.

03

There's something special about your place in the low season.



Seasons are like a kaleidoscope: they allow us to see a place in different lights, inspiring different emotions. Having four seasons is an opportunity to offer just as many reasons for your visitors to come experience something that is unique both to your place and that specific time of the year.

We often take for granted what's on our doorsteps, so let's look at your resources with fresh eyes and see how you can turn them into something special.

Seasons are like a kaleidoscope: they allow us to see a place in different lights, inspiring different emotions. Having four seasons is an opportunity to offer just as many reasons for your visitors to come experience something that is unique both to your place and that specific time of the year.

If you cannot find something special about every month of the year in your local area, do not expect that your visitors will do so. It's for you to take the initiative.



What are your seasonal assets?

Think about what you like to do in your area from November to March.



So, what can you offer that your visitors can enjoy most when not limited by time? Leisurely activities such as access to a great second hand bookshop, a local café with comfy sofas and excellent coffee, or activities such as cooking lunch with a chef, or going to the local market/in the forest with the chef to get the ingredients to cook and, then, (finally) eating the meal itself.

Understand your assets and then think about how they can be meaningful to create new experiences or to enhance current experiences.

- **Natural environment.** Each season calls upon different senses. The colours, smells and sounds are unique to specific times of the year and you need to bring out your inner poet to see, hear and smell through your visitors' eyes. The sound of the wind in the branches, the moving trees mirrored on the water, the smell of wet earth. In winter there may also be specific migratory birds or animals, or flowers that cannot be found in summer.
- **Emotions.** Now that you have turned up the sensitivity of your senses, how do they translate into emotions? You must show the link to your customers: braving the rain or the tumultuous sea becomes an adventure, the outdoor coolness reinforces the sensation of cosiness and serenity when cuddled up by the fireplace with a hot mug of tea.
- **Access.** Visiting an area off season also means having access to places usually off-limit during crowded summer seasons. Go behind the scenes of nature conservation with park rangers, visit the restoration area of a museum, walk your dog on the beach.
- **Time is different.** When you holiday during the low-season, time always feels slower. Maybe because it is less crowded, or maybe the weather stops you from packing your day with an unlimited number of activities. Yet taking a break means slowing down. So, what can you offer that your visitors can enjoy most when not limited by time? Leisurely activities such as access to a great second hand bookshop, a local café with comfy sofas and excellent coffee, or activities such as cooking lunch with a chef, or going to the local market/in the forest with the chef to get the ingredients to cook and, then, (finally) eating the meal itself.
- **Specific events.** Slowing down allows you to go local. What local events take place in your area? Is there a patron saint associated with a local craft celebrated during those months? A carnival? A food or art festival? But also, are there specific natural phenomenon taking place then?



We help local stakeholders to develop their skills in a high value-added product in low season.

Béatrice Rénaud, Head of the Tourism and Brand Unit, Landes de Gascognes Regional Nature Park (FR).



What we do:

We recognise a high value-added product, the wintering of Grey Cranes from November to mid-February, that has a particular resonance with birdwatching enthusiasts and we offer a unique experience, based on respect for the species and an in-depth customer approach thanks to the mobilisation of stakeholders.

How we do it:

The Grey Cranes are the largest migratory wader in Europe. While most migrate from Scandinavia to the Mediterranean, some winter in our territory thanks to its favourable ecosystem. This unique natural event attracts a large number of enthusiasts during the traditional off-season months. We develop knowledge of this phenomenon among local tourism actors (accommodation and restaurant owners, tourist offices, nature reserves, guides, etc.) and, together, we work to preserve the reception conditions of the migratory birds and to promote the birdwatching experience.

Initially, we brought together six founding partners for this project, each with their own area of expertise: the Ligue de la

Protection des Oiseaux (League for the Protection of Birds), the natural reserve of Arjuzanx, the local authority of Les Landes and the Landes de Gascognes Regional Nature Park, but also la fédération des chasseurs (the hunters' federation) and la Chambre d'Agriculture (the chamber of agriculture). We created a charter that dictates the commitments of the partners according to our three key principles: diffuse knowledge amongst local stakeholders, preserve the natural conditions and promote a unique birdwatching experience. As coordinator, the Park approaches tourist actors in the area that wish to become involved in the initiative and provides them with annual training courses, exchange opportunities and access to technical resources on the subject.

As a result, our service providers welcome a clientele of both enthusiasts and curious novices during the winter season, which they retain through a premium experience and which favours an increased return throughout the year. All of this is possible thanks to the increased technical knowledge of the service providers and the multidisciplinary collaboration of the actors in the area.



Our Tips:

Regular training of stakeholders, based on scientific and technical research, with constant monitoring of the evolution of the elements of preservation and enhancement of this heritage resource, is the key to real added value in the long term for the local tourism economy.



We involve local communities in the identification, and enhancement, of their local ecosystem.

Marie Duverger is the Site Manager at Port des Salines (FR).



What we do:

We organise a “Sel à Vie” outing for the residents of the island of Oléron, to carry out a participatory inventory of the biodiversity of the site and its salt marshes. While we neither have the time nor the right conditions to do it during peak season, this kind of activity in low season enables us to make the local community aware of their environment in a pro-active way, which encourages them to take ownership of it and creates a desire of preservation to be applied and shared both in the low and peak seasons.

The low season offers the optimal conditions for such an activity, with the crowds being away and the fauna more visible. We reach out to passionate individuals but also to people who wish to be initiated in this kind of knowledge, or who are simply curious to discover their local environment.

Not only does this anchor our activities in the heart of community life but it also develops a sense of pride and belonging. Equally, it means that best environmental practices are shared with friends and visitors that come to the area.

How we do it:

In collaboration with the nature office of the Borough Council of Oléron Island, we launched this campaign to involve the local communities. As a destination with a high level of (seasonal) tourism, it seemed important to us to unite our local population around an appreciation of the richness of our land by giving them the opportunity to learn to recognise its ecosystem, conduct an inventory of its diversity and learn how to preserve it.

The Borough Council helped us to communicate locally in each village as well as in the local press and on the radio. We opted for a light and fun format: between 2 and 2.5 hours, including an initial presentation of the species and the census methodology to be used, with accompanying information sheets, then at the end of the outing, a sweet or salty snack and a free visit to the exhibition “Salt for life, a pinch of biodiversity in our marshes”.



Our tips:

Two elements are key to the success of such an operation: make it fun (a short-ish format, led by an expert, with a relaxed time of togetherness afterwards to share experiences, without forgetting the local snack treats); and encourage a diverse group, both in terms of interests and age range, to encourage more dynamic exchanges and a more unique experience.



Assess the readiness of what you offer in advance of November to March.

Make sure you have the right people, infrastructure and equipment in place.



One of the biggest fears for visitors about the low season is the weather conditions. What indoor alternatives can you offer? Do you have a playroom, a reading room or a space for indoor activities? It is essential to identify activities that are not weather dependant

It's a chicken and egg situation: you may only be prepared to make the investments once you know there is demand, but there will be no demand until you take the risk. So whether you like it or not, you will need to take the initiative and get your resources in place.

Offer an indoor space. One of the biggest fears for visitors about the low season is the weather conditions. What indoor

alternatives can you offer? Do you have a playroom, a reading room or a space for indoor activities? It is essential to identify activities that are not weather dependant. If you cannot offer indoor spaces, provide some sheltered places outdoors and use poor weather conditions as a fun/new way to experience things.

Provide suitable equipment. Anticipate your customers' needs by offering weather-proof equipment: wellington boots for scenic walks on muddy paths, umbrellas for in-between transfers, warm blankets in the rooms, driers for dripping clothes. Use these to show your customer care and make customers aware of your added service compared to competitors.

Guarantee weather-proof access. Is your place accessible in muddy conditions? If you want visitors all year round, you will need to ensure that your place remains accessible under any weather conditions, particularly for customers with limited mobility. Whether it is your parking, driveway or the access between different focal points in your grounds, you need to make sure it is safe for visitors to drive/walk/wheelchair around.

Train your staff accordingly. Since in winter you will typically have fewer visitors, there is more time for your personnel and customers to bond over substantial conversations. This is an opportunity to build long-lasting relationships with your customers to increase repeat business and loyalty. To do so, make sure your staff knows all there is to know about low season activities, local specialties, traditions and your local environment.

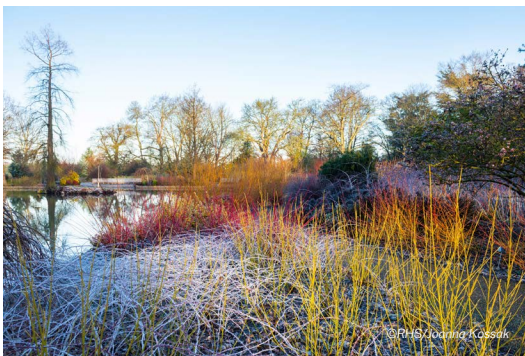


We redesign our experiences specifically to meet our customers' needs in winter.

Andrew Jasper is the Programme Director of RHS Wisley (UK), a vast garden including a glasshouse with three climatic zones, a learning space and a Growing Lab.



©RHS/Joanna Kossak



©RHS/Joanna Kossak

What we do:

We spent time identifying different customer needs and behaviours in winter compared to summer. Then, we upgraded our infrastructure, gardening programme, events, visitor flows and marketing to provide an optimal winter experience.

How we do it:

Visitors in winter are likely to be members of the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) who visit regularly and are, therefore, already familiar with the plant collection and layout of the gardens. With this in mind, we make the most of our horticulturally themed calendar to provide year-round entertainment value to our visitors. On our website, the “What’s looking good at Wisley?” page showcases the must-see areas of the garden specific to that month, placing emphasis on the plants that are looking their most beautiful, a message subtly reinforced with month-specific photography on the website. On site, our receptionists and signage emphasise what is in season. This creates a sense of novelty.



Our Tips:

Think about your customers' needs in winter and how to cater for them, rather than expecting the customer to adapt to fit around you.

In winter, we design dusk and darkness activities to extend visiting hours. We have improved visitor safety by installing welcoming lighting and improving our path infrastructure. We have designed an event calendar, including Glow winter lights and we invite local choirs to sing outdoors at one end of the garden, providing a focal point that draws visitors towards otherwise less visited parts of the site. We know that winter visits are shorter due to the lower temperatures so we sell mulled wine and hot chocolate from a small kiosk next to the choir.

The booking system instigated due to COVID-19 has also helped with visitor flows. We now need fewer parking wardens and we avoid queues because visitors have an allocated arrival time. This has improved the visitor experience.

These activities have allowed us to maintain the interest of our core audience, while expanding our appeal beyond traditional gardeners to be more inclusive of younger audiences.



We tap into the misconceptions of a winter wedding.

Charlotte Hutchesson is the Office Manager at The Wellbeing Farm, a sustainable events venue located in Edgworth, UK.



Our Tips:

Never underestimate the power of understanding your customers' fears. This is a gap in the winter market that is often overlooked, creating a blue ocean of untapped potential.

What we do:

We create unique, low season wedding packages that change perceptions of winter weddings. This frees customers from restraining the dates of their weddings to the spring and summer.

How we do it:

We recognise the two main reasons why couples are hesitant to choose winter experiences:

- 1) bad weather can lead to disruption or cancellation of the wedding, and
- 2) guest comfort in the cold climate. We tackle these fears by communicating extensive proof of our preparedness to battle poor weather conditions, which includes an onsite snow plough, our own supply of grit and a heavy-duty heater run by power generated from the farm's wind turbine.

In addition, we also emphasise features that would not be as successful in a standard summer wedding, thereby differentiating the experience for the guests as well as the couple. While the theme of Christmas is always a favourite, the longer winter twilight, coupled with the views from the farm, are equally persuasive. To top it off, we add our best, whimsical, snow-covered pictures of our farm to show them endless possibilities of how magically unique their wedding could be.

Traditionally, winter may not be a conventional season to get married in but, for us, it has become just as busy as summer because of the dedication we have put in to understanding our customers.



Collaborate with your local network.

Anchor your offer amongst the seasonal specialties of your area.

Customers often do not visit a destination in the winter for fear that there will be little to do. Every business needs to cross-sell the availability of other things to do nearby, in order to increase the desire of tourists to travel there in the first place and, importantly, to stay longer. Don't assume that visitors will independently go and find this information; make it easy for them as a way of becoming the hub of knowledge.

Research your local area.

Look for activities or traditional production methods that only take place between November and March. From wild mushroom picking, to truffle finding and meat drying, a number of local specialties only occur during the low season.

Identify your local partners.

Reach out to local craftsmen, farmers, small producers and people with a unique savoir-faire who either only have time to share with visitors in the low season or have a craft that is specific to that season. Work with them to create unique experiences for your guests and increase the destination's appeal as a whole.

List things to do.

Prepare a list of options of activities for your customers. Make it available on your website to encourage longer bookings but also in a well-designed folder in your accommodation, so visitors know what to do during their stay.

Inspire your guests.

Put at your guests' disposal a collection of guidebooks about the seasonal local fauna and flora or novels set at that specific time of the year from local authors to further inspire them. You can equally host a photo/art exhibition from local artists depicting the current season's scenic beauty or local festivities. Your aim is to create an environment for your visitors that is also an invitation to further explore the unknown gems of your area.



Put at your guests' disposal a collection of guidebooks about the seasonal local fauna and flora or novels set at that specific time of the year from local authors to further inspire them. You can equally host a photo/art exhibition from local artists depicting the current season's scenic beauty or local festivities.



©L'Œil de Paco



We highlight our seasonal resources with a solid sense of place.

Eliane Grimaldi is the Owner of the holiday cottage A Malba, in Corsica (FR).

What we do:

During peak season, local producers barely have time to give you the time of day as their sales are booming. The low season offers a unique opportunity to go behind the scene and create meaningful experiences. This why we offer our guests a range of unique experiences from an introduction to botany, to behind-the-scenes gastronomic discoveries directly with our local producers. It is little known that meat-curing or cheese-making are mostly done in the winter season. To make the most of the low season's slower pace, we also encourage our visitors to take part in local restoration/preservation projects of the local heritage (natural and/or cultural).

How we do it:

Our passion and professional training have led us to form close links with our immediate environment, both natural and cultural.



Our Tips:

Make your accommodation offering secondary to a full immersion experience in your local heritage. These unique experiences are the real reason to generate a high customer return rate.

Our dream is to not even open in high season, in order to fully concentrate on a clientele that comes primarily to seek a unique experience of the Corsican terroir, its nature, history and know-how, rather than an image reduced to its seaside assets.

The low season gives us the opportunity to take time with our visitors and offer them “authentic” experiences in complete privacy. My husband is a former environmental expert at the Corsican Natural Park, author of a book on ethno-botany and member of the jury of the Mele di Corsica (Corsican honey), all of which are diverse skills that we like to pass on to our visitors: fine tasting of Corsican honeys, excursions in the forest, discovery of our orchard, visits to local farmers and craftsmen, provision of a botanical explorer's kit for children (homemade), sensory games in recycled or upcycled materials in our garden, and much more.





Task 3:

Identify low season resources that are valuable to your organisation.

The importance of giving meaning to seasonality.

Identifying the specifics of seasonality in your area and, most importantly, how these can be reflected in your customer experience, is not always as obvious as it sounds and it may require some brain squeezing. The following steps will help you get some perspective:

Reflect on your personal interpretation.

In your own words, what does autumn and/or winter mean to you? Translate your thoughts into images. What are the mental images you associate with either late autumn or winter?

Research how these materialise in your area.

Identify at least three “events” that only take place between November and March in your area, for each of these three categories:

- Natural (fauna and flora)
- Regional specialties (historical heritage, season-specific savoir-faire, gastronomic specialty)
- Cultural (national/regional/local celebrations, community events, arts, sporting events, entertainment)

Turn negatives into positives.

Classify your list of winter thoughts and images into positive and negative. For the positive ones, reflect on how you currently use them in your experience design and marketing practices. For the negative ones, think how you can change your services to either turn these into a strength, or how you can overcome pre-conceived ideas that they are actually negative.

04

Let's design innovative experiences.



37% of domestic visitors choose a destination because of the experiences it offers

Now that you are familiar with the low season resources available to you, use them to design experiences that have meaning and value to your customers. Resources give you opportunities but, in themselves, they are insufficient particularly in low season when you may not have the latent demand.

It's time to use those resources and to get creative in how you package them as an experience that consumers can recognise and purchase. 37% of domestic visitors choose a destination because of the experiences it offers (VisitEngland, 2019).

You will need to create experiences that are great, even when it's cold, wet and dark. Co-create experiences with nearby partners and use events to drive demand.

Nobody said it would be easy!



Low season is the time to experiment and learn.

Use low demand periods as a chance for product development and market.



Customer needs are changing and in high season you do not have the time (nor want the risk) to experiment. So, use your low season to develop products based on the four concepts below that have proven to be highly successful at increasing revenue in our industry:

Personalisation.

You are unique! Customers look for products customised to their needs. Personalise low season when you have more time to cater for fewer customers.

Packaging.

You are hassle-free! Give your customers peace of mind by showing that all their needs are covered. Identify all the customer needs (transport, activities, food and beverages, entertainment, interpretation, accommodation, souvenirs...) and select which of these your target markets will appreciate having you take care of for them and which they can do for themselves more cost-effectively. Only package the elements that add value to the customer.

Premiumisation.

You are special! Emphasise the superior quality and exclusivity of your experiences to make your customers feel special. This also allows you to be less price sensitive.

Gamification.

You are fun! Engage your customers with playful experiences to encourage them to spend more and come back.

Co-creation.

You are social! Customers want to be the protagonists of their experiences not spectators. So, find a way to involve them further and create opportunities for them to share their experiences with others online.

After you have experimented with your off-season offer with a combination of these five ideas, then use your learnings to also improve your summer experiences. Make small changes first, to see how your customers respond and what the additional cost in time or resources is for you. Constantly learn from your experiments and introduce new improvements.

Search for examples of experiences in Airbnb Experiences, TripAdvisor Experiences, Expedia Local Expert and Get Your Guide, locally to you and in a highly popular region in your country. What can you learn from the examples?



We offer a different experience in the low season.

Elsa Déléris is the Owner of the holiday cottage gite de Poudally (FR).



What we do:

Winter is an opportunity to offer an experience with a twist. One of our most successful experiences is the “werewolf trail”, an experience we are offering to group and family customers that consists of a moonlit hike (hence the werewolf!) with a gastronomic stopover in a traditional “caselle” (local stone shepherd’s hut), a traditional hearty meal to be shared on our communal table on return to the gite and the room for the night.

How we do it:

We located a typical caselle large enough to accommodate 15 people, a few kilometres from the gite and accessible by an open path that was operable by moonlight. We packaged an experience to fit the

expectations of our winter target markets (hikers and family groups), mixing up the elements of an accessible hike, local gastronomic delights, a departure time that suits young families and an overall experience no longer than 3 hours with both exciting and relaxed times. We depart at around 5.30 pm, walk for 1h-1h30mins in the open air before reaching the caselle where a variety of local delicacies are waiting for the guests: warm drinks to suit all ages, local dried sausage, rocamadour (cheese) and pastis (a traditional cake from the Quercy region).

Back at the gite, guests arrive to find a warm “mique” (a kind of local ragout) for our adventurers to share on our communal table. This experience has long been a key appeal for our low-season clientele.



Our Tips:

Use the low season to revisit classic routes by offering a different perspective. Make sure you craft your experience towards your winter target market. Mix in some sense of adventure, some cultural and gastronomical discoveries, create the right conditions for entertaining interactions and package the whole thing under an intriguing name, and you have a recipe that rarely fails to make an impact!



We raise awareness of our resources amongst businesses. Hetty Byrne is the Sustainable Tourism Officer at the Forest of Bowland AONB (UK), who has worked with a local astronomer to promote dark skies tourism.



Our Tips:

For situations in which you need a critical mass of activity to create a new product, you need to work in parallel with local supply to raise awareness of the potential available. Launching a new experience in the market requires capturing the attention and imagination of both businesses and customers, and we have found that you are more likely to succeed with this in the low season, when there are fewer alternative markets for the tourism businesses and fewer entertainment options for visitors.

What we do:

The Forest of Bowland Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) promotes winter as the best time of year to star gaze, when you can see the Milky Way on moonless nights with the naked eye, since the skies are at their darkest and the stars at their brightest.

How we do it:

We offer a series of activities to raise awareness of the potential of dark skies as a tourism resource.

We identify five designated Dark Sky Discovery Sites and engage with about 20 tourism businesses as 'Dark Sky Friendly', which means that they have attended a training workshop run by the AONB and local amateur astronomer, Robert Ince.

In this training the businesses conduct a lighting audit of their premises and put an action plan in place to proactively reduce light pollution. The businesses learn how to provide information about star gazing in the area and receive marketing ideas of how to attract visitors out of the tourist season by promoting the dark skies of the AONB.

To raise awareness amongst visitors, the AONB runs a free of charge Dark Skies Festival week (in February half term) and encourages visitors to stay in the Dark Sky Friendly accommodation. In 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the third annual festival was virtual, with bookable events run via Zoom. Similar experiences can be found at: <https://www.darks skiesnationalparks.org.uk/>.



Create economies of scale and new experiences.

Bring in your partners and competitors to maximise your impact and reduce risks.



When demand is low, the easy option can be to fight for the crumbs. But by pooling your efforts, you might well be able to create a demand that wasn't there in the first place just because the existing offer wasn't sufficient.

Find a common need with other businesses in your area. For example, often, the Christmas season is not exploited to its full potential, partly because offers are too limited. If you are a venue or a hotel, your impact on your own is limited despite your best efforts to be creative in your offer. Yet, if different local organisations were to put on an attractive show, the range and scale of your appeal to potential visitors has the potential to be much more effective, with everyone benefitting.

Coordinate exchanges between stakeholders (or find the right facilitator

to do so) to find a common approach and put together a finely tuned communication campaign that offers a range of complementary local experiences to your visitors.

Share data. First off, data that might be irrelevant to some may be relevant for others. Secondly, the more information that you, and other local stakeholders, can gather on consumer behaviours and expectations, the more easily you can form a cohesive and impactful communication campaign and design better experiences for your visitors.

Join forces. Create new experiences by combining complementary products and services, and share the marketing effort and risk.

A word of caution: When you combine services with another supplier and you sell them together, you need to check whether your joint service falls under the new European Package Travel Directive (2018), which protects European tourists when two or more of the following services are sold together: transport of passengers; accommodation; car and motor rental; and other travel services, like excursions, guided tours or museum visits. It does not apply to those services that are part of another travel service, such as accessing on-site facilities such as evening entertainment within a hotel. But it may apply to, for example, creating a murder-mystery weekend or allowing third party suppliers to offer services within your own premises, unless they are sold as separate services.



We find synergy with local stakeholders that share the same issues.

Claire Ballossier is the Communications Officer at the departmental tourism development agency Loire-Atlantique Développement (FR).



What we do:

We have created a platform to promote our coastal destination, bringing together five seaside resorts to enhance the territory in the low season.

How we do it:

The Loire-Atlantique Développement agency (LAD) initiated the first “La Mer en Hiver” campaign in 2018. After approaching the tourism offices representing the main seaside resorts in the department, five responded to take part in the initiative.

Each tourism information office identifies the tourist operators active during the winter season in their destination and a marketing study is carried out by the LAD to group these offers under four key categories: *Thrills* (which includes all outdoor sports), *Wellbeing* (for an attractive indoor offer completely independent of the winter weather), *Nature* (which is much

easier to observe in periods of low attendance), and *Family* (for the fun part and concentrated on shared times).

Each category offers a range of activities with a direct link to the operators. The icing on the cake is that for those looking for a turnkey holiday, rather than individual activities, we have created all-inclusive packages for a complete holiday offer.

Our communication style is based on a vocabulary drawn from the mountains and winter games (slopes, wetsuits, sliding, slalom, etc.) to give a playful tone to an invitation to change habits. We seek out qualitative and attractive visuals for the web page and rotate the photos/videos regularly, using those taken at the same time the previous year to keep them seasonal and relevant. Also, we have created a hashtag, #LaMerEnHiver, with a direct feed that highlights the photos of Instagram users using the hashtag on their photos.



Our Tips:

Multi-sector collaboration is key to the success of an ambitious communication campaign. Work with partners to bring the best of their skills to bear, from financing (department and tourism offices), to identifying the activities to be promoted during the winter season (tourism offices), to setting up a powerful communication campaign (local tourism development agency). Don't hesitate to play on the fun aspect to encourage a new look and a better commitment from consumers.



Tap into people's yearning for a meaningful experience. Tailor experiences around wellness, self-discovery and purpose.



© Kent Downs AONB and North Downs Way National Trail



Whether it is through wellness, meditation, sport or experiences that will bring people out of their comfort zone, a holiday is the perfect time for people to take the time to look after themselves and some will seek to turn it into a personal journey of self-discovery.

To turn a product or service into an experience, you will need to find a way to make it resonate with your potential customers' needs. Here are five very different options to inspire you.

The bucket list. Everyone has their own bucket list with out-of-the-ordinary experiences they want to live at least once in their lives. Do not hesitate to design some “extreme” and/or weird and wonderful experiences that will, at worst, entice the most adventurous customers and, at best, catch the eye of curious potential visitors.

Reconnecting with nature. The pursuit of modern life has, paradoxically, created a strong desire for some urbanites to reconnect with nature. The COVID-19 pandemic has supercharged that desire to the extent of reversing the rural exodus. Happily for rural tourism venues, nothing can reflect the diversity and appeal of seasonality better than nature. Let it take the centre stage in your offers.

Going back to simpler things. Some of your customers will have a desire to leave behind all noise and hyper connectivity when going

on holiday. Sometimes, creating a meaningful experience can be as simple as creating the right conditions to allow that to happen. Offer no internet zones/sites, replace the microwave with a fire pit, provide hampers with fresh local produce and a cooking guide rather than ready meals.

Learning traditional savoir-faire. In a world of digitalisation, the possibility of learning long-forgotten crafts can provide your guests with an experience unique to your place and give people a sense of belonging. Give them an opportunity to learn how to spin wool or identify which wild plants to use to make their own herbal infusions.

Exploring oneself. Whether it is through wellness, meditation, sport or experiences that will bring people out of their comfort zone, a holiday is the perfect time for people to take the time to look after themselves and some will seek to turn it into a personal journey of self-discovery. While you cannot offer it all, it is all about offering the option and space to do this to some degree.



We optimise outdoor spaces during the colder months. Dawn Singh is the Duty Manager of Stirrups Hotel (Bracknell, UK).

What we do: We offer four luxury pods as an alternative, unique and sheltered outdoor dining experience that increases low season capacity and provides a night under the stars, no matter the weather. They are extremely popular, prompting an influx of business that has resulted in the pods being constantly fully booked.

How we do it:

To optimise demand, the pods are booked within five slots: Breakfast, Lunch, Afternoon Tea, Dinner and Drinks. This gives a variety of dining choices and a structure to ensure that there is time to clear and clean the pods between bookings.

With regards to heating, we use small fan heaters that are turned on prior to

the customers' arrival to ensure that the pods are warm. Use of the heaters means the hotel's electricity costs increase but the return is beneficial. Additional blankets and cushions are also provided for warmth and comfort.

In addition to the price of food and drinks there is a charge of £40 to hire the pod for two and a half hours.

Initially, the hotel rented the pods but, due to their high demand, we realised it was more cost-effective to buy them; after doing so, we broke even quickly. Our pods are placed in the hotel's garden but others have been placed on balconies and rooftops in cities. This shows the flexibility that these pods can offer.



Our Tips:

Personalise the pods with lights, candles and a small speaker. Ensure food is covered so that the dishes stay hot during the walk from the kitchen to the pod. Finally, add a buzzer for guests to press when they need service. This means that servers do not need to check on customers regularly, while the guests do not feel neglected.



Translate emotions into experiences.

Certain emotional states are associated with seasons: translate those expectations into live experiences.

What do your potential customers expect winter to be like? You can choose to fight their negative perceptions or, instead, you can play into the positive meanings and associations that winter may have for them. Sell the dream and make it a reality.

To do this, accessorise your experience to make it winter-themed. Christmas, in particular, is a time for nostalgia and a sense of belonging, so decorate your venue to encourage return visits, create a winter cocktail to encourage higher spending, organise a workshop to make your own Christmas decorations to encourage larger parties. Here are four themes to try:

Cosiness/Hygge. Autumn and winter are seasons of contrasts that make us think of wet, cold and dark outside, for which we compensate with warm and light inside. Whether it is a hot cup of tea or hot chocolate after a long walk, an evening by the fireplace with a good book or listening to old vinyl, or just a lazy sleep under a warm blanket.

Timelessness. With the natural elements being unpredictable and shorter days, it is harder to pack the day with activities. This gives a golden opportunity to approach time differently by offering experiences in which time is not of the essence. Promote activities that allow your customers to learn how to paint or draw what they see out of the window, or spend the morning cooking with a chef, or try their hand at some new craft.



Promote activities that allow your customers to learn how to paint or draw what they see out of the window, or spend the morning cooking with a chef, or try their hand at some new craft?

People. Sometimes what you remember best of your holidays are the people you spent them with; the unexpected laughs, the deep conversations, the shared experiences. Enable those connections by offering the suitable space and time for it. Market holidays as time for yourself and your loved ones.

Adventure. But it's not all about nostalgia! For some, the off season is also a time for exploration, pushing your own limits and going out of your comfort zone. Why not offer winter surfing or an overnight hike to a refuge?



©Norfolk County Council



We offer an opportunity for togetherness and a romantic, all-year round experience with portable fire pits and S'mores. Robert Rezin is the General Manager of Brentwood Hotel (US).



Our Tips:

Find a way to meet the growing demand among guests for experiences of togetherness. Sitting around a fireplace and roasting marshmallows happens not only to be that but also to be most enjoyable during the long winter evenings, addressing the question of low-season demand generation if marketed in the right way.



What we do:

We set-up 12 fire pits, one for each of our rooms, which create a lovely romantic atmosphere all year round, but especially in colder seasons. We offer guests \$5 packs of s'more ingredients for sale upon their arrival to the hotel.

How we do it:

Saratoga Springs has distinct seasons with gorgeous autumn colours and snowy winters. Although tourists may be more willing to travel and experience our nature in late

spring or summer, there is a special aesthetics to having holidays in the colder seasons, if done the right way. We offer portable firepits and set them up in the backyards outside each of our rooms. These fire pits have a box-like shape so that the fire never touches the ground, which prevents any negative impact on the grass and soil despite the frequent use.

At our reception, we offer 5-dollar packs that contain chocolate, marshmallows and crackers - the trinity required

for making the American campfire classic of s'mores - to anyone who has a desire to partake in this activity. It's a simple treat but it adds disproportionate romance to the firepit experience, based on many of our reviews, and enhances the word-of mouth demand.

We also use our website to promote the aesthetics of the experience for new guests, with professional pictures set in both daylight and darkness that show people enjoying the experience of cosying up near the fireplace.



Get a calendar.

Identify unique opportunities every month of the year and celebrate them.



©Kent Downs AONB and North Downs Way National Trail



Do you have offers specifically designed for each and every one of these dates? If your offer is always the same, there is no incentive for your customers to book now and your competitors who offer something different will do better.

Brainstorm the different opportunities available to you each month and how you can use them to develop timely offers. The examples below are generic but you can add specific opportunities local to you.

Halloween.

Finish October with a bang; this festivity is increasingly important for customer expenditure, in activities, food and costumes. The market for higher end tailor-made experiences is growing fast.

The market for pre-Christmas office parties.

From dinners out to team building days or weekend experiences, use November and December to target the office party market. A sustainability/authenticity themed team building experience gives that otherwise “samey” annual party a new sense of adventure.

Christmas shopping.

Here’s your chance to sell unique gifts particularly quality, locally made goods. From participation in workshops where you make your own personalised gifts to purchasing luxury, expertly made crafts, gifting experiences has massively increased in recent years.

Christmas and New Year holiday.

Decorate your premises to add a sense of luxury, develop special menus for food and drinks. Offer themed Christmases - family ones focused on Santa’s elves, or adult ones focused on a particular theme of music - jazz Christmas, folkloric Christmas. Alternatively, consider

non-Christmas christmasses - targeting people who don’t want to celebrate it or of alternative faiths.

Between New Year and Valentine’s Day.

Promote your experience as a Christmas gift for family members to buy each other and you are likely to get these vouchers cashed in during January and February.

Snowdrop walks.

Incentivise January and February visits to your destination by creating and promoting snowdrop walks, in the same way that you can create bluebell walks in May. Start and end in locations where customers have access to toilets and refreshments.

Chinese New Year.

As a 16-day celebration, with seven days considered a public holiday, the Chinese New Year is an excellent opportunity to celebrate Chinese culture and to generate sales, which is often overlooked.

Lambing season.

New-born lambs signal the start of spring and yet most tourists are not aware you can already see them in March. Promote an Instagram campaign to photograph early lambs at your destination.

Do you have offers specifically designed for each and every one of these dates? If your offer is always the same, there is no incentive for your customers to book now and your competitors who offer something different will do better.



We create award winning events for a growing niche market. Tailor experiences around wellness, self-discovery and purpose Stuart Beare, an unconventional farmer, transformed the family run Tulleys farm (UK).



What we do:

With a focus on seasonality associated with the farm, the family developed their “Shocktober Fest” Halloween festival, which now holds the prestige title of the “UK’s No.1 Halloween Attraction”.

How we do it:

The use of special effects, impressive scenery and live actors creates an immersive atmosphere and unforgettable experience year after year. The originally niche, but now growing in popularity, Halloween and horror themed event creates an enchanting, unusual and unforgettable event to attract guests, with communications emphasising the unique, novelty experience.

Following a successful summer of Tulleys’ Tearoom, Farm Shop and Pick Your Own (with over 40 different crops), we extended our passion for experiences to establish other seasonal



Our Tips:

Create a seasonal experience that complements your current event calendar to increase visitation at less busy times in the calendar year, when there are limited entertainment and event options for visitors. Effective transferable aspects include building an event by taking advantage of existing infrastructure, space, produce and stock, alongside the use of lighting and sound to transform the space and create a completely different, exciting and immersive event and event space.

attractions such as the “Giant Maize Maze” and “Shocktober Fest”, an out of season Halloween event that attracts visitors outside of the farm’s busiest summer months.

Our Halloween festival runs for the entire month of October, offering ten haunted attractions, live music and freshly prepared food. The farm-based festival now attracts over 100,000 local and national visitors of all ages yearly, transforming from a child-friendly event during the day to a more frightening, adult appropriate event at night.

Employing hundreds of local events staff, actors and musicians, it provides employment during a typically quiet month. Catering is largely locally sourced, which is better for the environment and benefits the local economy. Converting fields, barns, tractors and utilising traditional farming produce like bales of hay as props that can be used annually, also reduces costs.



Create your own events.

Rely on creating unique events to generate demand in low season.



Events are essential to encourage repeat visits by customers who may otherwise think your product is the same all year round. Also, to attract visitors who have a special interest in the event and might not, otherwise, consider your venue.

Creating your own event can be a fantastic way to bring together your **local community**, highlight your **organisation's values**, strengthen your **brand identity** and increase your **visibility**.

Find below a non-exhaustive list of event types:

- **Art festivals** (music, cinema, theatre, culture)
- **Exhibitions and shows** (hosting community groups and local dance or music schools)
- **Food** (street food events, buying locally sourced and delicatessen produce, learning how to cook)
- **Shopping** (pre-Christmas markets, artists' open homes, make your own gift events)
- **Societal events** (historical event, local celebrity, political movements)
- **Entertainment** (festival of light, carnival, Halloween, shows)
- **Trade events**
- **Unusual/exclusive/one-off events**

It would be hard to create new experiences for the whole low season but we can use events to generate sufficient demand over a short period of time to justify additional staffing and resources, and this can create enough confidence for other businesses in your locality to do the same. Use these events to raise awareness of the resources available and, year on year, to expand your low season offering.

Through local collaboration, one organisation provides the venue, another gives the knowledge or experience, another, the marketing know-how and access to new customers; this co-creation of an event spreads the risk and provides opportunities for shared learning and business development.



We create original events to attract visitors in off-peak periods. Sylvain Piantanida is the Site Manager at Les Jardins Sothys (FR).



What we do:

Reflecting the aestheticism of Sothys cosmetics, the gardens, a real work of art in constant change, are at full capacity during the summer period. That's why we use the low season to design and offer some of our most creative events, with the lower footfall allowing for more intimate experiences.

How we do it:

As the Sothys Gardens are located in Auriac in Corrèze we benefit from an incredible natural environment but remain relatively far from the main transport routes. To extend our season, we need to "create an event", as visitors are rarely just passing through the area.

As such, while we create each year a new annual calendar of events, we put forward the most creative ones in the quieter periods. Over the last couple of years, we have built strong relationships with local partners

in order to enhance both the use, and visibility, of our pristine natural environment.

This is how, after being certified as a Bird Sanctuary by the Ligue Protectrice des Oiseaux, we could offer bird photography workshops with an onsite exhibition of these photos later on. We work with a local environmental scientific institution to create a monitored initiative called "a square for biodiversity", by creating optimal wetland conditions in a part of the garden, and we use this opportunity to offer a nature and batrachian (an amphibian, typically a frog or toad) workshop led by an expert for young audiences.

Finally, one of the experiences that most fully reflects our ethos of being rooted in nature and aesthetics is our very own itinerant theatre piece "an invitation to beauty" where two performers lead the audience throughout the garden with a poetical narrative.



Our Tips:

In some territories, not only the locals but also the second homeowners hold a great deal of influence, especially in the low season. Not only are they regular customers but they also bring their own visiting guests. As such it is crucial to offer new experiences every year to keep on appealing to them. Adding extra peripheral services such as a restaurant and/or a delicatessen can also play an important role in retaining a local audience.



Task 4:

It's cold, wet and dark: what shall we do? Work with the seasons, not against them.

By now you are aware that too many companies hope to sell the products that work well in their peak season throughout the year, and this will not work. Does this apply to you? Here is how you can think differently.

List your three top selling products or services in winter.

Now write down what makes them different to your summer products.

Are the differences positive, such that you want to enhance them, or are your best winter products a poor version of your summer product? It may be better to increase your offering, i.e., provide additional benefits to consumers, rather than simply reduce prices.

It's time to brainstorm ways to enhance your products to become appealing winter experiences:

- **Theme it:** decorate for Halloween, Christmas and then Chinese New Year, so your customers always find something new.
- **Make it longer:** mix indoors and outdoors by adding extra activities such as an Autumn leaves family hunt and collage.
- **Make it unique:** tempt customers with small gifts such as a small drink or food tasting.
- **Make it special:** promote beach walks with your dog, which are not possible in peak season.
- **Increase the size of the group:** incentivise past customers to bring a friend.
- **Share it with another business:** Bring in an expert on a certain topic who needs a venue (or offer your expertise to different venues).
- **Share it with the community:** have an open day for schools, care homes, community groups.
- **Other ideas?**

05

Time for marketing and storytelling.



Journalists and social media influencers seek novelty and you are likely to get public media coverage opportunities in the winter that would not be available in the crowded summer market.

Customers want to enjoy vacations during the winter season but they don't know about your new experiences. Getting known in the market requires a lot of marketing effort and you may need new skills and partnerships.

Learn how to story tell and how to use social media, and consumers themselves will share the message for you.

The good news is, truly innovative experiences that are communicated well are likely to go viral. There are few competing experiences in low season, which means you have a better chance to stand out and be seen. Journalists and social media influencers seek novelty and you are likely to get public media coverage opportunities in the winter that would not be available in the crowded summer market.

All the marketing skills you experiment with this winter will be second nature to you for your next high-season, when you will be too busy to learn new tricks.



Invest in low season marketing resources.

You will need to work harder to attract winter, rather than summer, customers but the efforts will pay off all year round.



Most tourism businesses dislike having to market themselves and avoid spending much time doing so. No wonder they struggle to get customers in low season.

Identify communication channels.

Search online for “ten things to do in winter in my area”, or “winter wedding venues”, or “winter days out”, or the equivalent for whatever you are offering. Understand what those suppliers of experiences do that is different to your offering, and figure out how you can pitch for your business to be included.

Identify online publications in need of content.

Travel blogs and magazines need content so if you have a unique experience, invite journalists to experience your services and pitch a story to them, in the hope they will write about you. It's a lot harder to get featured in high season, when there is more competition, than in winter when these magazines have fewer options available.

Enjoy winter photography.

Sadly, most businesses have a very poor collection of photographs to promote themselves and they hardly ever include winter photos besides the odd snowy

landscape. Yet customers want to be able to picture themselves in the photography you use in your marketing efforts. Winter photography of cosy interiors and fireplaces, and beautiful landscape winter scenery can be compellingly evocative and inviting.

Update your website regularly.

Your website today needs to show what your business, and its surroundings, look like at the time that your customers expect to visit you. There is no point in showing pictures of people in t-shirts and gardens with flowers if you want customers to book for winter. The same can be said about the “things to do” that you offer: prepare website content that is season specific and rotate it throughout the year.

Market onsite to encourage repeat custom.

Produce a leaflet to give to visitors at the entrance or exit of your venue, saying “what's on this month” and, on the reverse side, “what's on next month”; this can prompt more repeat visits. A coffee table photo book showing your gardens throughout the year or photos on your walls showing beautiful winter landscapes near your property, can remind visitors that it's worth returning at different times.



Search online for “ten things to do in winter in my area”, or “winter wedding venues”, or “winter days out”, or the equivalent for whatever you are offering. Understand what those suppliers of experiences do that is different to your offering, and figure out how you can pitch for your business to be included.



We widen our appeal by harnessing social media trends to attract a new audience.

Elizabeth Meath Baker is the Director of Walsingham Estate Trading Ltd, responsible for public access to Walsingham Abbey, Norfolk (UK).



Our Tips:

Design your visitor experience to encourage people to spend more time, and money, by providing them with a number of “must do” activities. Encourage them to share photos of their experience.

What we do:

Instagram allows us to introduce our snowdrop walks to a new audience who are seeking instagrammable settings in which to take pictures, for example, of their children, partners or dogs.

How we do it:

The grounds in Walsingham Abbey are open in February for visitors to see the first flowers of the year, the snowdrops, against the historic backdrop of the ruined priory. Snowdrops multiply naturally, so we don't need to plant more bulbs. We have, however, planted some different varieties in specific areas over recent years to introduce more interest for those visitors who are particularly keen to spot different types. We are

developing a collection to showcase the snowdrop's amazing range, and we have designed the Abbey's gardens to provide snowdrop photo opportunities.

Walsingham is well known as a religious pilgrimage centre, so our snowdrop enthusiasts are a different market to our normal clientele who come in the pilgrimage season. We are extremely well known for our snowdrop walk and, to some extent, we are seeing the same people year after year who would not think to visit in summer. Snowdrops work well to attract social media attention and increase demand for days out, at a time of year when there are few leisure opportunities, compared to daffodils a few weeks later on, for example.

Snowdrop visitors primarily fall under the 'active retired' market segment, who want to treat themselves. They also tend to spend more as part of their day out than do our pilgrim visitors in summer who are more likely to be on a tight budget.

There are a number of cafes and two pubs in the village of Little Walsingham and the estate owns a farm shop, so the attraction of the snowdrop walks brings in secondary spend to both the estate and the wider village. Snowdrop bulbs are on sale in the farm shop. The walks also encourage more visitors to the Shirehall Museum, an eighteenth-century former courthouse that provides the entrance to the abbey's grounds



Harness the power of social media.

Create a social media plan and follow it systematically.



Most small firms do not dedicate enough hours to their marketing activities, which they fit around other tasks, particularly when it comes to social media. Rethink your approach and block out regular time to plan and deliver your marketing tasks.

Set yourself a target. Figure out what you want to achieve and why it matters to you.

Learn about your customers. Use social media analytics to learn more about the profile of your followers, so you

can rework your social media posts to meet their needs. Learn from your competitors. Identify 3-5 businesses similar to yours that are more successful in social media and learn what they do differently.

Learn what already works for you. What's different about the social media post that had the highest number of likes or shares, compared to your "average" post? Is it the time of day, the fact it has a better photo, the language you use, or that the content was funny rather than factual? Whatever it is, learn from it so your new posts will be more like it.

Each social media channel has a purpose. While Facebook and Instagram outrank all other channels in communication with customers, the purposes of YouTube or TikTok are very different, and you need to know what each channel can be used for.

Create a social media content calendar. Set up a posting schedule, for example with Hootsuite, so your posts are spaced out and they are released at the time of maximum engagement for your audience.

Set up social media competitions. Provide incentives to your customers to post about you, whether this is by offering them a free coffee per post (when they buy a cake), or run a competition of who gets the most likes on posts that you are tagged in (and then the prize needs to be larger).

Get professional help. Identify micro influencers that will want to test your services and invite them to honestly speak about you. While micro influencers with few followers may be happy to provide reviews for free in exchange for free use of your facilities, the people that are more established in social media will require a payment- you are not only buying their time, but also their endorsement.

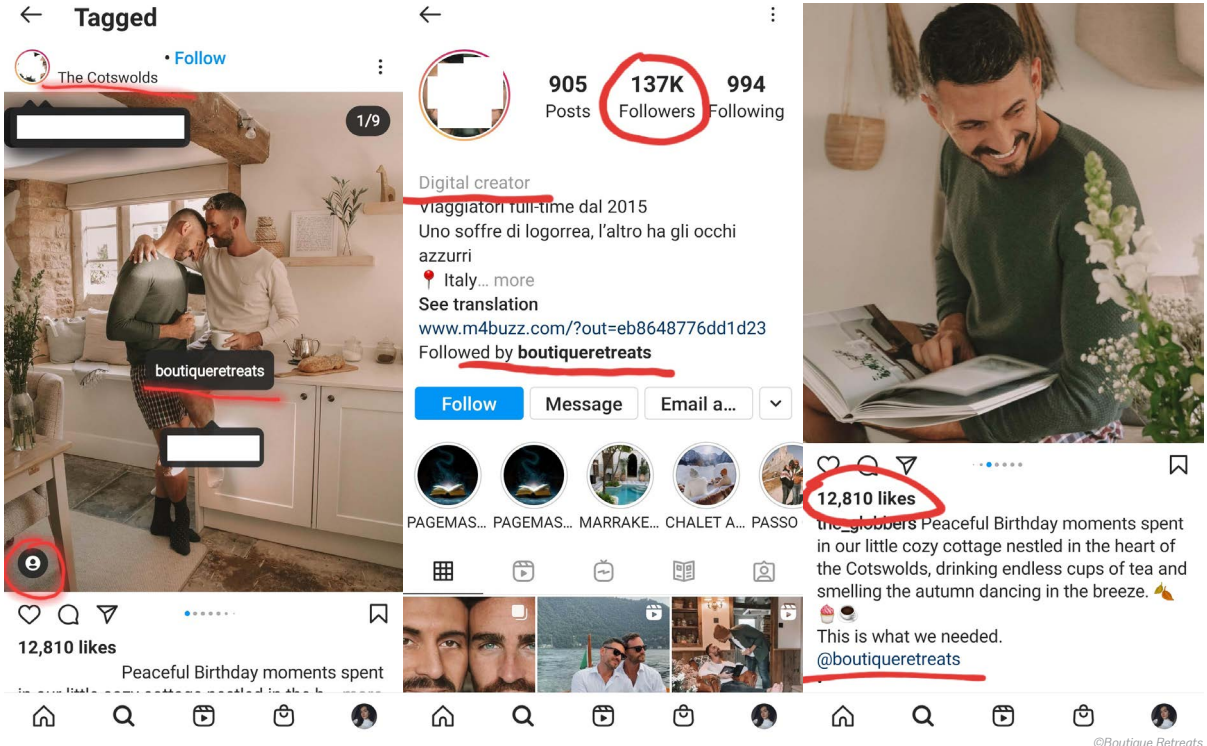


Identify micro influencers that will want to test your services and invite them to honestly speak about you.



We have a winter-themed Social Media Marketing campaign.

Boutique Retreats is a UK holiday letting agency with a wide-ranging portfolio of 150 unique properties of various styles.



The Power of Photography

As our cottages are targeted at connoisseurs of beauty, visual images are of utmost importance to our clients and are the element that directly influences their buying behaviour. We bring together a team of professional photographers and SMM managers to develop a quality product. Knowing that in winter, people want to be inspired and have their emotions stimulated, we use emotive photography to encourage a connection with our properties. Pictures of cosy interiors and log fires on Instagram enhance peoples' desire to visit. We see their reactions in the comments they leave and in how many of our photographs are saved.

Affiliate Marketing

We reduce the effects of seasonality by investing in our affiliate program, partnering with influencers and brands. We encourage travel bloggers to become our affiliates and, in so doing, their followers become familiarised with our cottages. Affiliate Marketing can be barter-based: in case if we provide partners with a 'Boutique Retreat' experience for free, and in return they provide us with social media exposure. However, the more established influencers with a large number of followers will demand a fee.



Our Tips:
Strengthen audience engagement on social media through eye-catching photographs and collaborations with influencers

What we do:
We encourage low season bookings with special offers and the main way we promote these is through social media. We believe that an effective Social Media Marketing (SMM) strategy is crucial for maintaining customer flows all year round.

How we do it:
Our formula for successful social media marketing (SMM) is: SMM=Photography + Affiliate Marketing

Some of our affiliates are home decor companies; they provide us with their products to decorate our cottages for the festive period and, in return, we tag their brand on our social media.

The benefits of affiliate marketing can be tracked with links, product/account tags. Affiliate marketing generally gives your brand more exposure and leads to the exchange of followers than traditional forms of social media marketing.



Become a storyteller.

Connect and inspire so that your prospective customer feels something.



Storytelling uses a combination of techniques to generate a narrative around your products/services, to inspire your customers to purchase.

Storytelling is the art of communicating so that your customers care about you. You are creating an emotional empathy, which means they trust you because they find your message relatable.

Contrary to traditional marketing that focuses solely on features and benefits, and balances quality versus value and functionality versus luxury, experiential marketing acknowledges that customers are both rational and emotional beings.

Storytelling uses a combination of techniques to generate a narrative around your products/services, to inspire your customers to purchase. It is strongly embedded in the social and cultural context you are targeting. Thus, knowing your audience is the essential first step to increasing the effectiveness of your marketing campaigns.

Sensory experience: engage your audience with visual content such as pictures and videos. Vision accounts for more than 50% of purchase intention. Sounds, smells, taste, touch can also improve advertisement effectiveness.

Emotional experience: create emotion-inducing stimuli such as happiness (more shares), sadness (more clicks), fear/surprise (more loyalty), anger/disgust (viral content).

Problem-solving experience: engage your audience with creative thinking and make them curious about your offers.

Physical/virtual experience and lifestyles: focus on the virtual experience of interaction with both products and other individuals, since action-oriented advertisement communicates motivation and meaning.

Ideal self: embellish customers' appeals for self-improvement and their desired impressions of the social context, for example, through social media and influencers.



We bring autumn to life with colour-blind-friendly scenic viewers.

Commissioner Mark Ezell heads the Tennessee Department of Tourist Development (US).



Our Tips:

Be on the lookout for innovative technologies of the 21st century that can open up the experiences of your destination to people with disabilities. The return on investment could be the generation of completely new sources of demand extending into the off-peak tourism season.

What we do:

We have installed “colour-blind” (colour vision deficiency) viewfinders powered by EnChroma lens technology at 12 parks and scenic overlooks across the Tennessee State, in order to enable colour-blind visitors to fully experience the magnificent beauty of nature.

the state. The ground-breaking spectral lens technology is designed to enable people with colour vision deficiencies to see a broader range of clear, vibrant colours. This technology gave us a chance to reach a unique tourist audience and offer them a memorable, often first-in-their-lifetime, experience.

How we do it:

While people with normal colour vision see more than one million hues and colours, the 350 million people in the world with colour vision deficiency only see an estimated 10% of them. Among everything else, the magnificent explosion of autumnal colours appears either much less vibrant or completely indistinguishable for people with colour-blindness, depending on the type and severity of their condition.

The accompanying YouTube video from Tennessee’s official YouTube channel @ TNvacation has been watched more than 3.8 million times at the time of writing. Thus, not only does the video continue to showcase the incredible experience we have in store for our colour-blind tourists, but also it serves as an unprecedented general marketing awareness campaign for the stunning beauty of Tennessee during autumn seasons.



Using EnChroma technology, Tennessee installed 12 new viewfinders at scenic overlooks across



Involve your customers in your storytelling.

No one says it better than the people who have experienced it for themselves.

Customers trust other customers more than they trust you. Your marketing budget and reach can be multiplied if you empower your customers. But your customers won't just promote you because they like you, you need to think about what's in it for them. Why would they find your posts interesting and why would they tell others about it?

Create discussions, not just adverts. If the entire purpose of your business account is to push your product, you will have limited followers. Less than 50% of your content should be advertising, the rest can be promoting local activities or events, talking about things to do near you, highlighting seasonal events, showing support for local charities... all of which indirectly create a desire in people to visit you. And all of these posts are more likely to be shared or liked than any advert that you post.

Rather than trying to put yourself in your customers' shoes to create relevant content on your communication channels, provide them with a dedicated platform such as:

- A live Instagram feed with a hashtag of your creation.
- A blog with guest contributions.
- A participative digital campaign.
- A contest for the funniest videos, the most unusual pictures or the most beautiful images of your site/venue/area.

Encourage your customers to create user-generated content about their experiences at your property or destination. Use video and encourage your customers to do the same. Then use their posts to create conversations.

Reward your customers for providing content that shows you, or your local area, in a good light. Run the occasional competition where you reward those users that get the highest number of shares or likes. You can run a small competition for the best ten things to do in winter near you, or the ten best cakes, or the ten most picturesque places in autumn colours... all of which create traffic and show other customers that there are exciting things to do nearby.



Reward your customers for providing content that shows you, or your local area, in a good light. Run the occasional competition where you reward those users that get the highest number of shares or likes.





We co-create activities and social media campaigns.

Martin Reynolds and Alice He are responsible for the China Ready Initiative at Edinburgh Tourism Action Group (UK).

What we do:

As part of our “China Ready Initiative”, we collaborate with around 30 visitor economy businesses in Edinburgh to develop Chinese New Year (CNY) experiences. This increases the satisfaction and engagement of Chinese university students, raises awareness of the Chinese market amongst businesses and improves footfall in the low season.

How we do it:

Chinese New Year was a low-key event in the city of Edinburgh mainly delivered by, and for, the local Chinese community. We identified an opportunity to build on these activities, engaging non-Chinese residents and businesses at a traditionally quiet time of year. New Year changes with the lunar calendar but falls between 21 January and 20 February, with celebrations lasting up to 16 days.

We provide a toolkit of resources for businesses in the visitor economy including a website, online CNY briefing documents and webinars. We partner with the Confucius Institute at Heriot Watt University to bring together and promote a number of Chinese events under a festival-style banner. We encourage organisations to light up their buildings in red, to decorate their shop windows, to give red envelopes to customers and, generally, to learn how to welcome Chinese visitors.

Our activities are supported by a social media campaign that has substantial reach and acceptance both amongst



©Martin P. McAdam



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Chinese students and local residents. Students act as brand ambassadors, sharing their positive feelings on Weibo and WeChat. Edinburgh’s social media channels have been independently ranked “Best in Europe” on destination engagement (according to *Dragon Trail International*), despite having a low budget. Our success is largely due to the appetite for visitor activities in low season, both by residents who see this as an enjoyable addition to their cultural landscape and by Chinese students who feel more welcomed by the city.

Our Chinese New Year activity aims to celebrate the connections between the Scottish and Chinese cultures. In 2019, we celebrated Burns Night and CNY at the same time and, for 2020, we reinterpreted the Year of the Ox as the #YearoftheCoo, linking the campaign to the much-loved Highland Cow.



Our Tips:

Develop opportunities for user-generated content on social media that is authentic and driven by your target audience. This will work particularly well in winter, when there are fewer competing events in the calendar.



Task 5:

Adapt your marketing effort to the different value you gain from different customers. Use your time and resources smartly.

Let's assume that you are the type of business that has a customer database. How do you use it to make marketing decisions? Do you send the same message to everyone, with the same offer, irrespective of the value that customer has to you? If different customer groups have different needs, then surely your marketing needs to be targeted differently too.

Let's assume you can break down your database in the following way:

Group 1. Most valued customers. If you are a cafe or restaurant, they may come weekly. As an accommodation business, they may come two or three times per year. You get the gist.
Group 2. Regular customers.

Group 3. Occasional customers.
Group 4. Once in a lifetime customers.
Group 5. Enquiries that did not convert into customers.

Your marketing efforts need to be proportional to the value of that customer group and the message you send should be relevant to their last experience with you. Typically, with every group you want them to move up to the higher group, e.g., for those in Group 5, you would like them to buy for the first time (becoming a Group 4 customer) and you may need to offer them a discount to do so. With Group 4 customers, your aim is to get them to visit again (becoming a Group 3 customer) so you will need to tell them that your experience has improved or that there is more to do. And so on.

Try to show your appreciation for Group 1, and market to them sensitively and show that loyalty goes both ways. Rather than trying to get them to buy more from you per se, you can have a personalised and generous offer to encourage them to bring family and friends, or to stay for longer, or to spend more by packaging multiple services.

Your task is to identify which sustainable experiences you are willing to offer to each group to tempt them to book with you next time, based on the principle that the more valuable the group, the more you should be willing to spend to keep them.

06

Be clear what benefits you expect.



Visualising the results you want to achieve will help you have the determination to make changes and deliver great benefits for your destination.

We hope you have found the ideas in this manual of use. It's now time to decide which changes to implement in your organisation. An investment of your time and effort, and taking the risk to make changes, can bring you worthwhile rewards.

Visualising the results you want to achieve will help you have the determination to make changes and deliver great benefits for your destination.



Reducing seasonality has a wealth of benefits.

There are many reasons to innovate.



Our interviews with all the organisations this report features led us to identify six key objectives that are commonly found amongst those that are willing to innovate.

- **Generate a year-round income.** Create unique products and diversify your markets to provide continuity to your business.
- **Improve the quality of your service.** Create year-round jobs to give your business the opportunity to retain talented staff and to reduce your recruitment and training costs.
- **Maintain your mid-season prices.** Increase the quality, variety and attractiveness of your offer so that you don't need to reduce your prices.
- **Provide a consistent service.** Open all year round to allow your business to set service standards and professionalise its service.
- **Be more creative.** Open in the low season to give yourself the chance to experiment with changes in your products that you might find too risky or time consuming in high season.
- **Increase loyalty.** Open all year round to gain more repeat customers as they favour businesses that are reliably open.



We open year-round to secure staff jobs and guarantee the quality of service.

Philippe De Bellevue is the Commercial Director of Les Ormes Domaine and Resort (FR).

What we do:

Originally, the Domaine des Ormes was a campsite with about 60 pitches. Today we have made full use of our 200 hectares of land, with a capacity of 3,500 visitors per day and an average of 60,000 visitors per year. In recent years, we have worked particularly hard on our winter capacity by creating low season activities.

How we do it:

One of the main objectives of our development strategy has always been human resources. We are a family business and we are aware of how central people are to our entire experience. Operating on a year-round basis has always been our ambition, to be able to offer permanent contracts to our nearly 100 staff.

- In 1989, we decided to develop a golf course to enable us to generate activity all year round.
- In 2004, we opened an equestrian centre that has a hybrid operation: accessible to campsite residents during the summer period, it continues to operate independently during the low season.
- In 2020, we created a dome covering our 4,500m² water complex, which allowed us to keep our outdoor accommodation open all year round and, especially, our quirky accommodation such as water huts, tree houses and “cottage huts”, which are in high demand all year round.

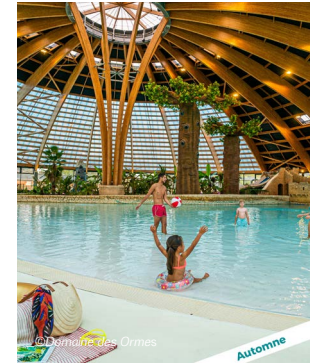


Our Tips:

Hiring seasonal workers can pose significant challenges in terms of quality, continuity and integration/training. Switching to be an annual operator, combined with training and investing in teams, can allow you to maintain the highest level of service quality and customer satisfaction.

- We have developed motorhome areas to meet the needs of a market that prefers the intimacy of the low season to the summer crowds.
- We have also cultivated a significant offer for business tourism that has the right hosting capacity, meeting spaces, both classic and atypical, as well as numerous team-building activities, both indoors and outdoors.

We have even gone so far as to open a training centre on our site to enhance the skills of our teams and offer them real prospects for career development. As proof, many of our current managers arrived as seasonal workers; some of them over 30 years ago.





We create gift vouchers to generate low season demand.

Isabel Sanchez is the Site Manager at the “spa cabins in the trees” Pella Roca (FR).



What we do:

We have created a unique site of unusual accommodation: spa cabins in the trees overlooking nine hectares of truffle fields, moorland and forest. Our product itself is usable all year round, particularly as each of the cabins has its own private ecological stove, spa and jacuzzi.

Even though our product can be used all year round, traffic is naturally highest from March to October. Our gift vouchers, with their specific conditions such as their validity over a two-year period, at any time except “high-season”, weekends and subject to availability, do an amazing job to fill those months.

How we do it:

Our offer corresponds in every way to the expectations of exceptional gifts: disconnection, nature bath, well-

being, unusual experience, high-end product but accessible for a particular occasion. It is the type of gift that suits romantic lovers, newlyweds, anniversaries or even young retirees in search of new sensations.

It is a gift that is easy to give and always makes an impact. As a result, more than 25% of our bookings come from gift vouchers that we sell directly on our website. As our cabins are in high demand, the summer periods are sometimes booked more than a year in advance, which means that the vouchers naturally fill our slower periods. Beyond the practicality for us, recipients of these gift vouchers tend to take time out of the usual seasons to enjoy this unique experience rather than approaching it as just a holiday destination.



Our Tips:

It is important to create a sense of uniqueness for these gift vouchers. Although the accommodation itself is an experience, we offer the possibility to personalise each voucher, be it with additional a la carte services, personalisation of the message or the choice of the basic package. The primary motivation for people purchasing a gift voucher is to make it a unique and personal gift.



Task 6:

Make space to think creatively.

It's time for you to prioritise what you will take away from this manual, and use it in your organisation.

Before you opened this manual, you already knew many of the things we said, but there's always a reason why you don't get around to do it. We hope that seeing them in black and white, with case studies to inspire you, gives you the motivation to make changes. You know that your organisation will benefit from it, and that you'll get a greater sense of achievement for having done something innovative.

1. Consider the list of objectives below and rank the items from most to least important:
 - Year-round income
 - Better quality of your service
 - Reliably high mid-season prices
 - Consistent service
 - More creative
 - Better customer loyalty
2. Reflect on your work practices. Write down the last innovative things you have done, identify which of the six objectives above these innovations contributed towards, and how successful they were.
3. Now identify one example from the previous case studies that you can adapt to your business to achieve the benefits that matter the most to you. Aim to replicate the easiest example, that requires the least amount of effort.

Only once you've succeeded, move to the second easiest, and so on.

4. Make a list of tasks that you need to do, in order to replicate that example. Write down how long you think each task will take, and whether they are recurring or one off-tasks.
5. Schedule time in your calendar for these tasks, at times that you can clearly protect to do them. Make this a realistic plan to minimise the chances of deviate from it. If you fail to do something once, get back on track and never miss twice.
6. Share your plan with someone else, and it's important that make a commitment to that person that you will stick to your plan, and that they hold you accountable to it. Check in with your "innovation buddy" weekly or monthly, to share your progress.

Checklist.

What will you do differently after reading this manual?

We hope the ideas and examples in this manual have made you think. Now it's over to you. Here's a quick memory aid to what we hope you will do differently after reading each of the sections above:

1. Products, make way for experiences.

Which are the senses you have been appealing to? How will you help your customers to engage with your offering with all their senses?

2. Different seasons, different markets.

Have you identified the different types of customers you want to attract and have you understood whether your current offering is adapted to their needs?

3. There's something special about your place in the low season.

Have you researched what resources and activities take place near you, and have you understood how they can be of interest to your customers?

4. Let's design innovative experiences.

Have you designed any new experiences that make the most of these local resources, and have you contacted organisations you can collaborate with to deliver them together?

5. Time for marketing and storytelling.

Have you set up a cost-effective marketing plan, learned new skills and set aside time regularly to tell your story?

6. What are the benefits you can expect?

Have you visualised the results that you want to achieve and used this vision as an incentive to keep working?

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Book a training course:

to design and market low season tourism experiences, for staff in your organisation, or members of your industry association or destination partnership, email: x.font@surrey.ac.uk

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