
Central Counties Tourism COVID-19 Current and Future Actions

Introduction

COVID-19 has had a global impact and has basically grounded the tourism industry to a standstill. The Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries (MHSTCI) is relying on RTO's to feed the government information up from and down to stakeholders as we work through the different phases of the pandemic.

Providing support to our stakeholders both from a B2B and B2C standpoint is the reason CCT exists. Our stakeholder-first approach positioned us well to quickly respond to support businesses, our municipalities, and the province itself.

This document outlines the actions we are currently taking and will be taking as we move into recovery mode.

Marketing & Communication

B2B - Recognizing Opportunity

Immediately after the announcement that all non-essential businesses were to close and travel restrictions were being placed on Ontario residents, CCT revamped CentralCounties.ca to include all necessary and relevant resources/information and support programs that stakeholders would need during this crisis. It is updated weekly.

In the CCT 20/21 Business Plan, the main priority is Stakeholder Support and Development, meaning a vast majority of the budget and staff resources are being funneled into programs and opportunities that fulfill this objective. CCT staff has identified the COVID-19 period as a unique opportunity to target stakeholders who now have the time to "work on their business." This has prompted CCT staff to jump ahead to Q2 efforts and develop

training content. And although we have not implemented the updated software delivery systems, we could not ignore this “moment in time” to educate.

Bantr Inc., a CCT digital content vendor, has offered up their services Pro-Bono, to assist in stakeholder education. Together, we will launch (May 1) our first CCT produced Educational Series which focuses on ‘Getting Started with Instagram’ and content development. This has been identified as a strong “need” requirement by stakeholders through both survey data and verbal dialogue (forum and one-on-one).

CCT is also working on a Strategic Writing Course for Grants and Funding Series, which will launch at the end of May.

Building Virtual Content

In support of the Ministers request for virtual content, CCT has also launched its **Virtual Content Program**. CCT, with the support of Bantr Inc. is assisting stakeholders with virtual content production. All produced content through this program will be authentic, relevant and representative of actual tourism programs and products. The content is focused on getting consumers ready and excited to take their Ultimate YDH Road Trip when it is appropriate to do so.

In conjunction with a CCT Stakeholder Call-Out via the B2B website and newsletter, CCT Field Managers have been actively seeking suitable stakeholders. All content will be sorted under the primary YDH consumer categories: Foodie Fanatics, Adventure Seekers, Family Fun, Passionate Putterers, and Art Lovers.

The response has been incredible. Current projects to be completed for the May 1 launch of the consumer portal are:

- **Joyride 150** – Trick Ride training at home to prepare for track riding at Joyride 150
- **Durham College Centre for Food** – Agri-Tourism food growth and cooking lessons – links to farm tours, Bistro '67 food philosophy and cooking courses hosted by Bistro '67.
- **Clearwater Farms** – Backyard Earth Rangers - stay at home educational experiences – small scale projects that reflect tourism programs.
- **Lynx and Hare Cycle Shop** – Circle check bike tune-ups. How to select a bike for YDH preferred trails. Matching bikes with skill level. Tourism Shop Rides.
- **Adamo Estates Winery** – Event based wine tastings with wine master series. Viewers must purchase wine.
- **Beer Sisters (Influencers Food & Drink Magazine)** – 3 Pre-taped Instagram Video Beer/Tasting Videos – produced by Beer sisters on their channels for amplification of audience.
- **Kendall Hills Farm: Food Education** – Food literacy including Chicken and Hatching, Joys of Mushroom Farming, Meet the Veggie Farmer (in support of Virtual Farmers' Market).
- **Noodle Gallery at the Alton Mill** – Purchasing art. The importance of seeing it in person, talking with the gallery owner/artist, how to prep your home for hanging.
- **Theatre Orangeville** – Staging a play at home 101 – from scriptwriting to set construction to direction.

In addition to the content CCT is helping stakeholders produce, we have also been gathering all stakeholder produced virtual content links; .g. the virtual roller coaster rides from Canada's Wonderland.

The Minister of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries has instructed Destination Ontario to create a new website called [Ontario.Live](#) which is to feature virtual content. It is not particularly a tourism site, but one for Ontarians to virtually experience all of the great things to see and do in the Province. Since most of our stakeholders' visitors (95+%) are from Ontario anyway, we are framing this content as a call-to-action to visit once it is safe to do so. The content we are encouraging and assisting our stakeholders to produce will be fed to this site and provide them a greater reach to new audiences.

This new content will have legs far past the ending of the current crisis and will assist the stakeholders to build their audience and provide municipalities, DMO's, CCT and Destination Ontario great stories to feature as part of the recovery efforts.

Virtual Market

CCT field staff have been busy gathering existing online/curbside/deliver shopping as well as encouraging stakeholders to try something new. This is a trend in many municipalities and with our DMO's. The Virtual Market portal is not a duplication of effort, rather another way for customers to learn about the great opportunities to support local businesses.

The portal will link to other sources (stakeholder/municipal/regional/DMO sites) of information about what is available for purchase, where, and how to get it.

Our stakeholders are already responding. Just this morning we received an email from a local brewery offering free delivery to anyone within 15km of their location. They wanted to make sure that we knew about their offer and that we were going to include them in the virtual market. It was great that we were able to tell them that yes, we were aware of their service and they were already flagged to be included in the virtual market AND that we were working on adding them to our B2C story about Brews and Booze to Go, which continues to get good pick-up.

B2C - YDH Homepage

We have repurposed and re-positioned all content to be viewed by the consumer as pre-planning material for their future YDH Road Trip, while offering new opportunities to explore our regions virtually via the Virtual Market and the Virtual YDH Road Trip.

Both portals will link to YDH produced content and/or to an assigned exit link provided by the content producer. They serve to amplify the efforts of stakeholders including BIA's, Municipalities, Associations, and Regions. CCT will promote the portals via paid and organic digital, and through Instagram ambassadors, which is going to further the reach for all of the stakeholders involved.

Media Support

The media has been very supportive of CCT and its stakeholders through the COVID period. We produced complete stories ready for publication and we got some great pick-up!

- **Toronto Star** – Brews and Booze to Go
- **Dine Magazine** – Foodie Fun from a Distance /Take out for foodies in York Durham Headwaters
- **CHIN Radio** - Foodie Fun from a Distance - Take out for foodies in York Durham Headwaters
- **Core Magazine** - Keep Kids Busy at Home! From Virtual Roller Coasters to Canadian Art, York Durham Keep Kids Busy at Home!
- **Kidz Magazine** - From Virtual Roller Coasters to Canadian Art, York Durham Headwaters has it all!
- **York Region Online** - From Virtual Roller Coasters to Canadian Art, York Durham Headwaters has it all!
- **Snap'd** - From Virtual Roller Coasters to Canadian Art, York Durham Headwaters has it all!
- **Snap'd** - Foodie Fun from a Distance - Take out for foodies in York Durham Headwaters
- **Dailyhive.com** - Foodie Fun from a Distance - Take out for foodies in York Durham Headwaters

We amplified Canada's Wonderland's efforts through media advisories and they have been tagging us on their social media posts. Just this week they provided the recipe for Funnel Cake!! I know what I am doing this weekend.

Central Counties has developed a great relationship with City TV's Breakfast Television. They are aware of the content we are helping our stakeholders produce and they are waiting for us to provide unique virtual experiences so that they can do a virtual live eye on their program.

Instagram and Social Media

For clarity, here is a breakdown of what we have done:

- Immediately suspended all paid and organic spring posts
- Supported all stakeholders still offering tourism product through shared stories sorted by category
- The Field Managers reached out to all stakeholders, ensuring they continued to tag @visitydh, @(region/DMO), @municipality and hashtag's # in order to amplify their efforts. This is also communicated in the B2B newsletter
- Supporting all virtual experiences, take-out and food/beverage delivery through curated posts or sharing posts.
- Re-crafted our spring language to encourage planning visitation while keeping our regions top-of-mind.
- We are currently planning a support campaign for the launch of the Virtual Market and the Virtual Road Trip Portal. This will be shared with the regions and Destination Ontario for amplification.

Municipal and DMO Support

Communications

One of the best things to come out of the current crisis is improved communications across all channels. Some organizations like Durham Tourism, have stepped up and taken a critical leadership role to ensure that a) tourism and its stakeholders stay top-of-mind with municipal staff and Councils and b) that all of the municipalities share what they are doing with each other.

Central Counties sits on the Durham Tourism Leadership Team and has been asked to sit on the York Region Economic Recovery Task Force which is in the process of being formed. A seat at these tables allows Central Counties to both inform what we are doing and, more importantly, learn about what support measures are still needed.

For many stakeholders, there really has been information overload. In the first month of the State of Emergency, things seemed to be changing hourly. Our regional partners were quick to develop resource pages specific to partners in their areas. CCT has direct links to these pages on its COVID-19 resource page at centralcounties.ca so that stakeholders loop back into information that is relevant to their specific region.

Research

Central Counties is assisting the MHSTCI and TIAO by providing analysis of the industry survey results. To date, there have been three completed surveys with the fourth currently underway. One of the things that Tom has been doing is segmenting the results by RTO, which provides each region with a snapshot of the state of the industry.

Municipalities and our DMO partners are able to use the data to influence and inform decisions that benefit tourism and hospitality stakeholders. We have set up a dedicated [web page](#) that has both the provincial data and the regional data.

Tom is now in the process of breaking down the surveys by sector which will give our municipal and regional partners an even better sense of the issues facing the various sectors in the industry. He is also sitting on the research committee for a large RTO/Ministry research project to better understand visitor (focus on Ontario) travel intentions and expectations. This is currently being developed for deployment in the coming months.

Connecting

As explained above, CCT is amplifying the efforts at the municipal and regional levels to inform consumers about the shop local opportunities in their communities. We have also offered our support to communities that want to link it with CCT resources. For instance, the Tourism Vaughan Corporation asked if they could use the wireframe we developed for our Virtual Market so that they didn't have to re-invent the wheel. In the end, they opted to link it directly with CCT which provides mutual benefit because more stakeholders are creating profiles on our platform for us to highlight now and in the future. Our efforts were recognized by the mayor during one of his public addresses.

Recovery

Central Counties is part of the Minister's Tourism Leaders Panel, which has been tasked with informing decision-makers what recovery could look like for the industry. We will be reaching out to our municipal and DMO partners to talk about recovery and what measures should be implemented to help the industry bounce back from this disaster.

With CCT's direct links to the Ministry and the Minister, we are a good resource for municipalities and our regional partners to both learn about their priorities and inform the province about concerns and opportunities arising from the crisis.

Stakeholder Support

In addition to all of the B2B and B2C marketing and communications opportunities for stakeholders, CCT continues to provide stakeholders opportunities to work ON their businesses while they are shuttered.

Learning Opportunities

Central Counties has reached out to all other RTO's asking that they share their created industry equipping content with us. As the content links come in, CCT will be including them in the B2B newsletters and putting links up on our B2B website.

On April 3, CCT hosted a webinar for stakeholders about dealing with the crisis. Over 150 people participated in the hour-long presentation and many more have watched the [recording](#) of it since. It was well-received, with several people reaching out to thank us for doing it.

As mentioned in the Marketing and Communications section, CCT is actively developing workshops that provide opportunities for stakeholders to learn new skills that will assist them to be successful during the recovery period and in years to come. We will continue to solicit feedback from our stakeholders to determine what other things they would like to learn about.

Experience Development

One of our key messages to stakeholders is that they can be using this time to work ON their businesses. Not only will this help get their minds off the realities they are currently living, in some cases, it provides a bit of light at the end of the tunnel.

Just prior to the world changing in mid-March, CCT completed three Art and Artisan Focus Groups. Staff is currently compiling all of the information into a summary and next steps document to be circulated back to the focus groups. The next steps are to hold virtual meetings with core groups of artists and art organizations to begin to determine what types of experiences could/should be developed in each of the regions.

In the coming weeks, we will be reaching out to our T&T stakeholders to begin discussions about what the program could look like "virtually" in the short-term and what special things we could do once they are allowed to host guests on-site. Finally, we are connecting stakeholders to begin discussions on how they can work together now and into the future to develop partnerships and destinations.

Building Capacity

During this time, many stakeholders are looking at ways to kick-start their businesses once they are allowed to. Group tours is something that many are interested in but haven't had time to fully investigate. Tamara is working with stakeholders, who now find themselves with some time, to educate them on the expectations of the group tour markets and help them build out products that will satisfy their needs.

CCT had planned on hosting a Group Tour Marketplace in May, which was going to bring inbound tour operators and stakeholders offering group products together to learn and sell. This has had to be postponed and we are hoping that it can be held in late September in conjunction with the annual tourism symposium.

With the work CCT is undertaking to assist stakeholders to be ready for groups, we are confident that the marketplace will be more successful than ever!

Government Conduit

CCT has a direct line of communication with the Minister, the MHSTCI staff and TIAO. We have been asked by all three to provide information directly from our stakeholders. Stakeholders have been reaching out to CCT explaining the details of the situations they currently face which has helped, and continues to help, shape some of the decisions being made at the provincial and federal levels of government.

Some of the things we heard from stakeholders and have been able to inform government and TIAO about include:

- Wage subsidies don't work for businesses closed to the public
- Rent is one of the biggest monthly expenses for many tourism and hospitality businesses
- Seasonal businesses were falling through the cracks of early measures
- Seasonal businesses need a ramp-up period and need to know ASAP when the government plans to ease restrictions and what that is going to look like
- Festivals and Events have outlaid expenses for events that are going to be cancelled
- There is a gap in "Business Interruption" insurance coverage for pandemics and mandated business closures

We also have good relationships with the sector associations and have been able to feed stakeholder information to them to help guide their government submissions.

Recovery

The road to recovery for the industry will be a long one and will have different effects on different sectors within tourism. Central Counties will be working with sector associations, TIAO and the province to help shape what that will look like.

We will be reaching out to stakeholders to learn what their plans are and begin sharing best practices from across the province. CCT is also going to apply for a FedDev grant to bring in business consultants to work directly with stakeholders to implement re-opening efforts under restricted conditions.

Crisis Management Plan

Utilizing the information and research gathered, along with a record of steps taken by staff during the COVID-19 crisis, CCT will be producing a *CCT Crisis Management and Communication Plan* that addresses CCT programs and protocols. Part of the CCT plan will include a communication strategy with stakeholders during a crisis.

As stated in the introduction, CCT was well-positioned to deliver support to its stakeholders when the pandemic shut down the province, and continues to be a valuable resource. While we never want to have to go down a road like this again, we would be remiss in not having a plan in place.