



Tourism Cluster Partnerships

Partnerships – as the Tourism Cluster wraps up, the partnerships built during the process continue on.

It takes two or more to tango to make a successful partnership.

Partnerships can be between two people or between two or more large organizations or social bodies.

In the case of the College of the Rockies' (COTR) Rural Tourism Cluster, the partnership included government, industry/business and the college, with the community it serves as the heart of the program.

Covering the same broad area that the college serves, from Golden in the north to Creston in the west to Elkford in the east and Cranbrook/Kimberley area in the south, the Rural Tourism Cluster has worked to create an enormous volume of beneficial and need-to-know information for tourism operators and educators.

It isn't easy creating partnerships but their value is understated and long-lasting.

In an evaluation of Rural Knowledge Clusters, Victor Cumming of Westcoast CED Consulting Ltd. noted, "One of key lessons is that some partnerships take years to develop and only then are they able to design and initiate activities that are mutually beneficial. Building trust is often a slow process measured in years, not days or weeks. Other partners are "ready, willing, and able" so cementing these relationships is relatively easy. In the case of this site, the partnerships covered the whole spectrum."

COTR's Carrie Schafer, who helmed the cluster project, said many eyes have been opened toward the concept of partnering in tourism.

"The cluster has brought together all different tourism industry business operators who traditionally don't get together or have been competing against each other in the past. With the college being the coordinator, is it a non-threatening opportunity to work together with positive results. Businesses have shared issues, brainstormed solutions and experimented with results such as Copper Point Golf Club general manager Brian Schaal sharing employees with Panorama (Mountain Village), resulting in better employees, reducing seasonal employment, saving money on recruitment, retention and training of employees.

"When businesses share what they are experiencing in their business - positive or negative - businesses don't feel alone and can put together strategies faster to deal with the change. For example, sharing the difference in the customers this past season, businesses realized that the

customers were coming from a closer area and staying longer, as a result business can change their marketing tactics to a more regional focus,” she said.

“Information sharing was key to overcoming distance barriers. When the cluster brought businesses throughout the region together, we discovered that we all had labour shortages; this discovery prompted us to approach GO2 which had planned a labour information inventory elsewhere. When they saw how hard we were hit because of the rural nature of the region, they moved the study here, which was a major development,” stated Heidi Romich, owner of Cranbrook’s Heidi’s Restaurant.

“The cluster meetings really opened our eyes as to how serious the worker housing and daycare situation is. We’ve identified that a group of businesses need to get together and build housing for workers, but we need to mix it with other housing to avoid ghettoization,” said Copper Point’s Schaal.

“The cluster really confirmed that we need to think out of the box. We asked why our golf course isn’t packaged with other things like a hockey camp or a skill hill. As a result we’re considering building a skating rink to anchor a relationship with other winter destinations here,” he added.

“I think the project has been key in having tourism recognized as real industry and economic driver here and that it can offer a real career. There is an understanding of rural issues underway, a change in attitude. Communities are recognizing tourism as a broader economic generator,” said B.C. Small Business and Tourism Ministry representative Kevin Weaver.

Corinne Friesen of CMF Creative Marketing Focus pointed out that knowledge is critical and partnerships and sharing boost each business owner’s chances at success.

“The close knit (tourism cluster) network gained strength through the sharing of knowledge and ideas leading to an improved understanding of the many realities unique to the industry, as well as the many connections and opportunities they share that will improve how they run their businesses, ie the links to education training, joint marketing and improved contacts to industry equipment and services etc.,” she said.

“The Tourism Knowledge Cluster has developed a firmly established partnership network, that will live on in the Kootenays and long be an example to be held up for other regions to study and aspire to. The four years of knowledge and relationship building are part of an invaluable legacy left by the program. The Tourism Knowledge Cluster lives on,” she exclaimed.

The major findings in COTR’s Tourism Knowledge Cluster are:

1. The rural tourism knowledge cluster activities were well attended as tourism operators tried to learn how to keep pace with the expanding market for servicing visitors while struggling to locate and hold qualified staff.
2. Key operators with provincial association connections joined the steering committee while support agencies participated more reluctantly at first, given the historical struggles between

agencies for diminishing senior government resources. Key industry staff was quick to sign-up for on-line training programs initiated by the RKC initiative.

3. COTR, like College Boreal, found building trust and lasting partnerships took substantial effort and time. The participatory approach was key to building successful involvement with steering committees and participation in initiatives.

4. COTR library and database systems rose quickly to the challenge of providing “new” on-line and hard copy sources to industry players. Those who were interviewed talked openly about the “new” ideas and capacity that they had learned and recently applied. The success with the transfer of practical, usable knowledge, combined with the participatory approach, contributed significantly to the increased recognition of the role of COTR as a partner in expanding the economy in the region.

5. While it is early in a cluster development strategy implementation to look for tangible improvements to existing businesses or new businesses created, there are examples where early adopters quickly saw significant business advantages from adopting the innovations. The positive financial impact for those operators has been substantial.

Tourism remains the key growth industry in the region covered by the Cluster project and continued efforts at partnering by business, government and other bodies will be a key element in the success and ongoing growth of the industry.

“Partnerships are crucial to the industry as tourism businesses have unique struggles and by partnering they explore how they can deal with them for the best of everyone. One tourism businesses solves the problem of which is the best cost effective benefit plan for employees and shares with the group saving the rest a lot of time and expense. Businesses work together to promote each other’s businesses and promoting a more regional tourism experience,” concluded Schafer.