

Your Town A Destination

The 25 Immutable Rules of Successful Tourism, Roger A. Brooks & Maury Forman

Rule #16, Great Stories Make The Campfire Memorable

The rule of telling stories

The rancher's cattle were disappearing at alarming rates. A look at the dusty terrain did not uncover any human footprints, so they must not have been rustled. But carcasses weren't found either, ruling out wild animals. And since the fields were fenced, the Nevada rancher was quite sure the cattle didn't just wander off.

After months of agonizing losses, the rancher sent out a couple of farm hands to stake out fields. They bedded down on a hilltop, and at dawn one morning, they heard loud whooping and hollering and the sounds of bellowing cattle in the valley down below. They scrambled out of their sleeping bags and ran down the hill as fast as they could to where the cattle were gathered. With guns loaded and cocked, they stopped, dead in their tracks, gaping in amazement....

Storytelling has been a form of entertainment since the Stone Age. It began with stories around the campfire and etchings on the cave wall and has progressed to bedtime stories and midnight readings of Harry Potter. Storytelling, like opposable thumbs, is a characteristic that distinguishes humans from all other animals. Stories entertain, teach, establish moral precedents, and recall our genealogy. They can do just about anything and always bring people together – including bringing visitors into a community.

Cultural tourism is the fastest growing segment in the tourism industry. It takes visitors on a journey of discovery, beyond the gift shops and amusements and into the community's soul, into its history, environment, and the arts.

Museums are a mainstay of cultural tourism. They will often display items from the town and showcase some of the unusual characters that lived there. But many museums fail because they simply show artifacts rather than tell stories. They have collections of old bottles, typewriters, furniture, industry equipment, and all sorts of memorabilia that have meaning but not context.

What makes a museum successful is its ability to tell stories, either oral, written or visual. An artifact without a story is boring to most people. But a story brings it alive. It makes it real and memorable. And it keeps visitors in the community longer, which translates into more spending. Museums that tell great stories will captivate visitors for hours, and they'll develop a bond with the community. Besides, they'll tell other people, who more than likely will have to see it, read it, or hear it for themselves.

And now, for the rest of the story:

...they stopped, dead in their tracks, gaping in amazement as they came face to face with the old crook, Crazy Tex Hazelwood, rustling the rancher's cattle while wearing the novel shoes you see here (see page 45 of *Your Town A Destination* for the pictures).

Want to see, read and hear some more great stories? Visit the Northeastern Nevada Museum in Elko. But beware; you'll be there for hours.

Questions for Success:

- Do your town museums tell stories or just display artifacts?
- How long does the average visitor spend in your museums?
- Are the stories interesting enough to capture the visitor and entice them to return?
- Are the displays unique and captivating?
- Are interesting stories about local buildings or sites included as part of the museum program?