

John Day River Territory: Regional Brand

THEME: United by a new regional brand and network of informed, enthusiastic local champions, diverse small businesses in the region grow through their new connection with the Eastern Oregon Visitors Association. Relationships built while working together on the new John Day River Territory brand as a distinct part of Eastern Oregon has also led to successful new product development to enhance the visitor experience, including a set of self-guided itineraries.

PROJECT IMPACT:

The newly established JDRT brand has been catalytic in connecting communities and attractions with the promotional activities organized by EOVA as the designated “regional destination marketing organization” (RMDO) for all of Eastern Oregon.

- Eastern Oregon Visitors Association reports higher participation by new and established businesses in collective regional marketing efforts.
- Multiple local businesses with products of interest to visitors, especially related to culinary tourism, report increased sales directly tied to the new market exposure received through the Travel Oregon sponsored FEAST culinary tourism event in Portland, and participation in cooperative regional marketing.
- New product development under the banner of the John Day River Territory brand.
 - New series of travel itinerary guides completed as a project that emerged from the RTS.
 - New road added to the “Journey through Time” state Scenic Byway, increasing the lure of Mitchell as a destination that is represented in regional marketing

The Rural Tourism Studio was pivotal to building agreement about working with the new brand by educating local organizations and businesses about EOVA’s role as a partner and resource. The Rural Tourism Studio also provided followup technical assistance related to branding, and direct funding for the itinerary project.

PLACE:

Located in the north-central part of Oregon, the four-county John Day River Territory includes Sherman, Gilliam, Wheeler and Grant counties. This is sparsely populated country. The total population (2012) of this rural region is 12,426 people across 8,272 miles. The northern part of the region is located along I-84, a major east-west highway. State Highway 26 is the primary east-west route for the southern part of the region. Federal Highway 97 carries north south traffic in the western part of the region. Other north-south routes are secondary, often very winding highways. The closest major airports are in Portland, OR and Boise ID, 2.5 to 4 hours away depending on starting location.

Like many areas along the Columbia River, it is located in the ancestral territory of many tribes, including the Columbia River Tenino and Wyam, Nez Perce, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Reservations, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Reservation, Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakima Indians, and the Northern Paiute. The Oregon Trail passes through Gilliam and Sherman Counties. This part of the region was first settled by non-Indian pioneers starting in 1858.

While the region shares many characteristics in terms of architecture, history and population density, the topography is varied. Gilliam and Sherman County are primarily open rolling terrain cut through by steep river canyons. Sherman County has the state’s greatest percentage of land under agricultural cultivation. Wheeler and Grant County’s terrain is more varied and rugged, including parts of two national forests (Ochoco and Umatilla) and internationally known

geological features such as The John Day Fossil Beds and the Painted Hills. The John Day and Deschutes Rivers in the region are nationally designated wild and scenic rivers.

The area's economy has long been dependent on natural resource-based activities and it is subject to swings in agricultural commodity prices, especially for wheat and barley. Ranching and forestry are also important sectors in Grant County, which comprises over half of the region's land mass. Throughout the region, there has been a concerted effort to expand marketing and develop new tourism products that highlight cultural/heritage resources, outdoor recreational opportunities, and agri-tourism. Tourism is still a relatively small part of the regional economy, with the most visitor product currently centered on Grant County.

STORY:

When the Rural Tourism Studio began in the autumn of 2010, efforts were already underway to develop sub-regional brands within the Eastern Oregon Visitor Association geography. The branding work had begun as a partnership with Travel Oregon to strengthen EOVA's role as the regional destination marketing organization (RDMO), approximately two years earlier, with Wieden and Kennedy as consultants. Still to be accomplished was the integration of local efforts into a cohesive marketing strategy. The potential for the John Day River Territory to become a defined visitor destination within EOVA through such integration was one of the things that brought these communities together to RTS.

At the start of RTS, the network of local Chamber of Commerce had varying levels of interest and engagement in tourism, and there was little collaboration among them. The idea of subsuming the John Day River area's marketing (for example, its website portal) under the umbrella of a larger organization from "outside" was not fully embraced. Furthermore, few businesses had been participating in regional marketing sponsored by EOVA. In fact, many businesses were not at all aware of what Travel Oregon and its Regional Destination Marketing Organization could offer in terms of cost-savings and market exposure. According to Alice Trindle, EOVA Director, "RTS was the catalyst for building understanding of tourism marketing, and fostering better communication both internally within the sub-region as well as with the RDMO. "

Finally, there was little collaboration among providers of tourism services and attractions. Speaking from her mobile office (a.k.a. sitting on a horse waiting by the ranch gate for a guest group) Karen Anglin Wilson of Wilson Ranches Retreat summed up the change in tourism development capacity. "Prior to having our regional brand, each of the businesses worked with EOVA independently but we didn't work together to package and refer. Now we are so much more knowledgeable and connected."

After much negotiation and planning, the John Day River Territory area's web portal is now accessed through the Eastern Oregon Visitors Association website. Its design elements are consistent with Eastern Oregon's overall brand, but its content is driven by information selected by the JDRT partners. While the locally generated content is still being augmented, it is already visible to a much wider audience, and professionally maintained.

The process of developing a sub-regional brand not only resulted in a more efficient way to promote the region to visitors; it also built a network of chambers, tourism businesses and regional/statewide promotional capacity that led to new product development and increased business success. This increased connection is visible in several ways.

- Several local specialty food producers, in coordination with EOVA, participated in the 2012 FEAST event, part of the Oregon Bounty statewide marketing campaign sponsored by Travel Oregon. These include Wheatberries bakery in Condon that uses sources local wheatberries, the Roundup Grill, a newly reopened

historic restaurant also in Condon, and Black Rock distillery, a vodka manufacturer in Spray. As a result, these businesses saw increased sales. Furthermore, the quality of their products led several travel writers to visit Eastern Oregon earlier this year for an Oregon beef and brew dinner, anchored in Condon, which should generate additional regional promotion.

- The owner of a small vacation rental in Mitchell, Aruna Jacobi, learned about the JDRT brand and EOVA as she was researching how to extend the Journey through Time scenic byway into the Painted Hills Unit of the John Day Fossil Beds Monument via a 65 mile loop that would pass by her property. Working with EOVA, she organized a great community volunteer effort to achieve success. New signage was erected in the summer of 2013, and the route expansion is featured on Travel Oregon's website.
- Development of self guided themed itineraries for visitors traveling by bicycle, motorcycle or car. This was the major new project identified during the RTS planning process for implementation.

The initial concept for the itineraries included creating multiple routes for each of three transportation modes: bicycling, motorcycling and driving. The JDRT committee contracted with a local writer to research, recommend and document these itineraries. As a first step, representatives of each county brainstormed a list of the best features of their own county, and then followed up with information about visitor support services such as recommended restaurants, local food producers, and lodging. Then, working with the contract writer, they identified the following themes:

- Journey through the Old West- focused on landscape and heritage
- Outdoor Lovers- focused on the John Day River and Cottonwood Canyon
- Nature Lovers- Active recreation, focused on hiking, fishing and camping opportunities
- Natural Beauty- Passive recreation, including the Fossil Beds

While not part of the original vision, the driving routes (both motorcycle and car) have been organized around segments of the existing Journey through Time scenic byway. Visitors can combine 2-3 day segments into longer trips as desired. Some of the more significant regional assets included on multiple itineraries, and featured points of interest are customized to meet the different travel patterns of motorcyclists vs. automobile drivers.

The bicycling routes are naturally shorter, and are oriented around specific interests rather than as a single contiguous route. Each county has created a bicycle riding itinerary that reflects its character and attractions. The themes include:

- Paleo-Lands in Wheeler County
- The Old West Scenic Bikeway in Grant County
- Windmills and Wheat Fields in Sherman and Gilliam Counties

The itineraries were completed in the autumn of 2013, and have not yet been integrated into regional marketing via the website or other mediums, so the impact on tourism is not yet known. However, it is clear that the process of developing itineraries has already sharpened awareness of regional assets and the services needed to make them more accessible and attractive to visitors.

TIMELINE



LESSONS LEARNED:

- A distinct regional brand, well connected with a larger geographically defined brand, is a powerful tool for communicating to stakeholders within the region (businesses, chambers and community leaders) the opportunities for working together to grow tourism.
- Outreach to tourism-oriented entrepreneurs is key to new product development. Many of the initiatives achieved here were led by small business owners who were not initially aware of how to tap regional and statewide marketing opportunities.
- Allow six to nine months for developing new itineraries, not counting the additional work to create promotional tools (e.g. web information, brochures, apps, etc)
 - Pay attention to the things that “your grown kids would see as cool and want to show their friends”, for example, the mountain identifier sign in Condon: highlight these on itineraries
 - Get advice from people who are familiar with the communities, but has also lived away from the area and can bring a fresh perspective.
 - Consider the different needs of travelers depending on their mode of transportation, and be sure that key services are featured on the inventories (e.g. sources of water for bicyclists, campgrounds for motorcyclists, wheelchair friendly attractions, etc)

BUDGET:

No Rural Tourism Studio funds were used for the regional branding work, although Travel Oregon supported that work in its earlier partnership with Eastern Oregon Visitors Association. The Travel Oregon Rural Tourism Studio matching grant was used to develop the regional itineraries.

Income	Cash	In-Kind	Total
Travel Oregon Matching Grants Program	\$ 7,500		\$ 7,500
Gilliam County	\$ 1,000		\$ 1,000
Sherman County	\$ 1,000		\$ 1,000
Wheeler County	\$ 1,000		\$ 1,000
John Day River Territory committee	\$ 100		\$ 100
Travel expenses for writers, photographers, videographers		\$3,770	\$ 3,770
Project management (JDRT Committee members)		\$3,400	\$ 3,400
Total Income	\$11,600	\$7,170	\$18,770

Expenses			
Travel writers (3)	\$ 3,600		
Photographer/videographer	\$ 4,900		
Website developer	\$ 750		
Cooperative advertisement with EOVA in Portland Monthly and Oregonlive.com	\$ 1,250		
Social media campaign consultant	\$ 500		
Travel expenses for writers, photographers, videographers		\$3,770	
Travel reimbursement	\$ 600		
Project management (JDRT Committee members)		\$ 3,400	
Total Expenses	\$11,600	\$ 7,170	\$18,770

TOOLS/RESOURCES:

John Day River Country brochure, advertisements and maps

Itinerary and visitor guide in text form, in process of being formatted for publication at this time.

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