

Oakridge “We Speak . . .”-- Everyone as Visitor Ambassadors

THEME: Oakridge tourism advocates are working to ensure that every person who comes in contact with a visitor can be an informed ambassador for all the community has to offer.

PROJECT IMPACT: Enhanced visitor experience: visible network of knowledgeable local residents to provide accurate and interesting tips for visitors. In the first year, approximately sixty people received this training, all provided by community volunteers.

PLACE: Oakridge is located in eastern Lane County, in the western foothills of the Cascade Mountains. Together with neighboring Westfir, the area population is 4,100 people. The community is surrounded by the Willamette National Forest and its world-class natural assets and recreational areas, including Waldo Lake, Salt Creek Falls, and the Willamette Pass ski area. It is also located on a primary highway route from the Willamette Valley to Crater Lake National Park.

The area was hard hit by the decline of the timber industry in the 1980's and 1990's, and still is more economically distressed than the state or county. Over the past 10 years, Oakridge has gained recognition as a premier mountain biking destination: the City has branded itself “Mountain Biking Capital of the Northwest”.

STORY: At a Rural Tourism Studio workshop late in 2009, Travel Lane County's Natalie Inouye hatched a destination development idea when she noted that she'd seen lay people in other countries wearing buttons identifying them as visitor information resources. Another participant, Catrina Davis, jumped in “What if our buttons said ‘We Speak . . .’ followed by the variety of things that visitors can do in our community?” This led to a creative community ambassador program that engages local residents as friendly expert resources who “speak” the language of mountain biking, birding, snowshoeing and other topics to visitors.



The goal was to enable all the front line people that visitors might meet (at a restaurant, gas station, or other local business) to offer a friendly and knowledgeable “face of the community” by sharing information about the community’s visitor attractions. These ambassadors would be trained by a cadre of local experts in various topics such as mountain biking, history, kayaking or birding, for example. They could choose which topics to receive training on, depending on their own interests. And after the training, they’d be outfitted with identifying buttons, fact sheets, and display information for their place of business.



There have been two rounds of training so far, one in the fall of 2011 and the other in the spring of 2012. The fall training focused on winter attractions (skiing, snowshoeing and craft beers), and the spring training on summer attractions (including birding, wildflowers, mountain biking, camping, road cycling, and hiking). A half dozen people attended the first training, and a dozen the second. The We Speak team also trained the staff of Travel Lane County to familiarize them with the community’s assets.

We Speak was also promoted in conjunction with Travel Oregon’s Q-Care Customer Service Training as mutually beneficial for participating businesses. It is not clear how many training participants also (voluntarily) completed Q care training: better tracking of this information is expected when the program is expanded beyond the pilot phase. As one example of integration, at least 30 high school juniors at the Oakridge Junior/Senior High School completed Q-Care and We Speak trainings as part of the Careers Class curriculum.

To prepare for these trainings, the planning committee recruited ten community experts to give an overview of their topic to participants. Each trainer prepared a fact sheet to help answer frequently asked questions. The planning committee publicized the training events, which were held in one central location. They worked with Travel Oregon and Travel Lane County to design the training materials, including “We Speak” buttons, laminated “Frequently Asked Questions” and window decals for participating businesses. They have produced all but the window decals to date.

The Oakridge We Speak program is currently on hold (as of March 2013) until cash resources can be secured to cover the program's hard costs. As testament to its promise, however, two other Oregon communities have launched We Speak programs modeled on Oakridge's positive experience to date.

Upon re-launch, the plan is to move away from centralized trainings and deliver training on site at local businesses. Interested businesses will be reached through a survey and regular visitation. A refresher course with updated information and fact sheets will be offered every couple of years to all past participants.

TIMELINE



While it took nearly two years from initial idea to the first workshop implementation, this is because there was significant program design work. The project coordinator recommends a one year lead time for new communities seeking to build a similar program: with a very energized lead person, it could be done in as little as six very busy months.

LESSONS LEARNED:

- Not everyone who is a subject matter expert is a good trainer. The quality of training varied greatly by volunteer. Build a small network of dynamic trainers who can deliver information from the subject matter experts to the businesses and their employees.
- Deliver training at the place of business: Centralized training brought more of the managers rather than front line people. Encourage businesses to integrate We Speak training into the workday for front line employees, and make it convenient by conducting the training on site in small bites e.g. one topic at a time. This makes it easier for employees to participate rather than making them attend on their own time after work hours.
- Set up systems to track how the Q-care program and We Speak are reaching people, and how they are using the information in the workplace. This helps build momentum to get a critical mass of local residents trained as effective community ambassadors.
- Leverage resources from outside partners who share your goals. But also plan on fundraising to cover additional hard costs.

BUDGET:

While Travel Oregon and Travel Lane County provided in-kind graphic design and program planning assistance, the effort was primarily volunteer-driven. One community leader printed the fact sheets, the Tree Planting Committee lent its button making machine, and sheets and use of the laminating machine originally acquired for the Mountain Bike Oregon event were also donated.

Beyond these in-kind donations, We Speak received approximately \$1,200 from Travel Oregon as one of the projects supported through a \$10,000 project implementation matching grant after completion of the Oakridge Rural Tourism Studio workshops.

Catrina Davis, the lead local coordinator, estimates that she devoted over 500 hours of volunteer time in this project since its inception (over approximately two years to date). After the initial start up, she estimates ongoing coordination needs to be ten-twelve hours per month on average. If another community does not have that level of volunteerism, it may need to budget for hiring a part-time coordinator.

Despite the tiny cash budget to date, volunteers have organized a team of experts willing to share what they know, a training program for businesses, and marketing material to support program implementation. Annual funding of \$3,000-\$5,000 would go a long way to grow and institutionalize this novel program.

TOOLS/RESOURCES:

- Topical fact sheets (sample) and “frequently asked questions” tip sheet
- Button and decal templates
- Business survey to identify those interested in hosting a We Speak program for their employees, as well as topics of interest

This project has been adapted by other Oregon communities, including Estacada and Yachats. These communities can be contacted for information about their approach.

CONTACTS:

Catrina Davis, Coordinator, 541-505-4217: catmarried@gmail.com

Samara Phelps, Travel Lane County, 541-484-5307: Samara@EugeneCascadesCoast.org: