

**Explorers' Edge Board of Directors Meeting Minutes**  
**Tuesday, May 17, 2016**  
**Georgian College Muskoka Campus, Bracebridge**

**Present:** John Miller, Jackie Leung, Curt Dunlop, Andy Vitch, Hilary Chambers, Jeff Suddaby, Gary McMullen, Drew Rachar, Kim Loader, Anthony Rizzo

**Regrets:** Nicole Saulnier, Dympna Hayes, Jerry Feltis

**Resource:** Laura Hernando – MTCS

**Guests:** Karen Tait-Peacock – Tourism Excellence North, Peter Coish – Kuration Inc.

**Staff:** James Murphy, Erin Smit, Cindy Kaupp

**Welcome and Introductions:** Jackie Leung called the meeting to order at 9:37am

**Approval of Agenda – May 17, 2016**

**Motion:** Curt Dunlop

**Seconded:** John Miller

**Discussion:** n/a

**Carried.**

**Approval of Minutes – April 5, 2016**

**Motion:** Curt Dunlop

**Seconded:** Hilary Chambers

**Discussion:** n/a

**Carried.**

**Financial Presentation: Transfer & Auditor Update – Andy Vitch**

Treasurer Vitch discussed financials are with the auditors, not much to report at this meeting. Spent \$23k to date, \$560k transferred thus far. Discussed changing the auditor and why; last fiscal year EE used new auditor – board discussed this decision was made to review services and accept new quotes; Clark Westcott was hired and paid \$4800 for 2015 fiscal, this year quote was budgeted at \$8800; was also going to bill \$280/hr to come to AGM. Board discussed and decided will return audit services to Gordon, Gingrich, Harris and Fleming; offered \$4k a year for three year contract as well as free AGM attendance.

**Motion to Accept New Auditor for Three Year Contract; Gordon, Gingrich, Harris and Fleming**

**Motion:** Curt Dunlop

**Seconded:** Gary McMullen

**Discussion:** n/a

**Carried.**

**Marketing Presentation – Peter Coish, Kuration Inc.**

Coish spoke to collection and analysis of fiscal year marketing results and how advanced the system has become; how EE is getting the most out of every dollar spent. Some highlights include:

- 882.5k visits to EE website (691k previous year)
- 224k outbound referrals (63k previous year)
- 1.37 million page views
- 4033 email leads acquired (1400 previous year)
- Email open rates and CTRs increased dramatically with lead nurturing software using segmented personas
- Google searches for all 5 sub-regions were up 29% over previous year
- 19,393 referrals to JackRabbit booking widget
- 102k Facebook fans

Coish discussed the difference in early year spends, how money was not working as efficiently as it is now with content marketing. Spoke to the Facebook page specifically; third highest of travel pages in the province, second highest RTO behind Toronto. Not only are those 102k individuals fans of the page, but they actively interact with the page. Discussed JackRabbit and spend correlation; what will make it easier for the consumer to book. We don't accept monies for bookings, but track referrals to operator sites; metric tracks who is using JR as well as who clicks through to operator pages. ED Murphy mentioned this is the year we take a hard look at JR, are we getting good value out of this for the spend; decision will be made by the board at the end of this year for that three year contract, is this worth renewing? Suddaby asked for Muskoka Tourism stats in regards to JackRabbit referrals; Tyler to respond.

Coish spoke to site visitor activity, KPIs; 70% of visitors come via smartphone and tablet (50% mobile and 20% tablet). Use of PC desktop is flat lining, mobile is accounting for more and more of time spent online. Discussed the way in which we consume content, comes from an app like FB; click on story, read, and go back to your FB feed – must be in the news feed more often, won't click off and browse around site, implications of that shown in bounce rate. PPS and bounce rate were improved over last year, can be attributed to improvement in the explorersedge.ca user experience. Also discussed organic search rates; how often are businesses found with common search words in their name, i.e. Muskoka? Searches are also increasing for visitors seeking specific information on each of the five sub-regions.

Coish discussed traffic sources; Facebook continues to be the most cost-effective traffic generator, was 72% of total traffic this year, vs. 52% in 2014. Always looking for new ways to acquire traffic, discussed traffic acquisition methods that were tested this year including Programmatic Native, FB Exchange and Instagram; none came close to performance of FB. Explained "bots" – inauthentic traffic coming to your site. Facebook is authentic traffic, real people who convert to email lists and who we can realistically bring to the region. Cost per session has gone up for FB in the past four months, something to discuss; could have a significant impact on the traffic generated per dollar spent.

Coish discussed traffic by source and compared costs per minute on site for things like FB and Instagram; Instagram can promote your brand but won't generate traffic to your site. Facebook continues to

improve, but we always keep our eyes out for new and well performing acquisition platforms. Coish discussed the Google CPC campaign; discussed negative words used as not to divert traffic away from operators. ED Murphy discussed continuing with search and discovery model, obligation to operators to continue with what is successful for them.

Coish spoke to referral performance, as well as referrals by source. Highlights include:

- Referrals up 289% in 2015, totally 225,000 outbound clicks
- Overall referral rate in 2015 was 25 clicks per 100 visits, vs. 16 in 2014 (up 63%)
- Organic sources generate the most outbound clicks per visit – OntarioTravel.net for example generated 70 clicks per 100 visits (however, these sources, while highly effective, are only a small portion of total site traffic)
- Of paid sources, Facebook is the most effective, generating referrals at cost that is less than half that of Google CPC
- Facebook generated 21 referrals per 100 sessions, compared to Google CPC at 30 per 100 sessions. However, Facebook referrals are just 40% of the cost of Google CPC

Discussed blog performance; analysis of top ten blog posts showed they generated an average site visit time more than three times the site average (48 seconds vs. 17 for the site overall). The top ten blog posts accounted for 28% of total page views for the year, down 40% in 2014; this indicates that we were less reliant on the success of individual blog pieces in 2015. Older posts, like the one about the ice trail, also drove high volumes of organic traffic; the top ten posts alone accounted for 31,000 organic visits (20% of total organic traffic). Also discussed how blog posts are very effective referral generators; the top ten blog posts generated 432 referrals per 100 page views – that's almost 30 times the overall average for the site. Also seeing more traffic coming from a broader array of topics ie. Trilliums and Ryde Barn Quilt Trail.

Coish spoke to Facebook page and post performances; 2015 was a milestone year for the page as we broke the 100k fans mark. The EE page is now the 23<sup>rd</sup> biggest in the country as measured by page likes. At 100k fans as of February 13, the page is the third largest tourism page in Ontario. The page is also the fastest growing in Ontario, and depending on the week, sees the highest engagement rate. Our posts reached almost 25 million Facebook users, and generated almost 800,000 engagements (likes, shares, comments, clicks to website); overall engagement rate was 3.2%.

Coish then discussed the lead nurturing strategy and how is traffic on the site is converted to visits to the region; building a lead database of emails to push out to visitors specific and relevant information that pertains to their interests. Content is delivered based on personas, clicks increase due to this. In 2015, 4000 new email leads were acquired, and new program that was launched to segment existing leads into persons resulted in almost 2,700 segmented leads. Benefits of this segmentation were proved in the first two HubSpot email campaigns for fall and winter – open rates were almost 54% higher than in 2014, while click rates were 150% higher. Also discussed other social platforms and their performance including Twitter and Instagram – Twitter account grew by 1,099 to finish the year with 4,433 followers. The account achieved almost 300k tweet impressions and over 11k profile visits with no advertising

support. Instagram account grew by almost 300% in 2015 to 1,337 followers; posts have an average engagement rate of almost 5% over the past 3 months.

ED Murphy spoke to budget reconciliation on these spends, as per the TPA activity. All spends were on track with the budget line items. Also discussed marketing plan recommendations, including additional programs (partnership, transacting, and product development). Additional programs are:

Partnership:

- International US/UK
- Tourism Excellence North
- Content Development
- Festivals & Events
- Signage (Loring-Restoule and Amazing Places)
- Strategy/Inventory (Craft Beer)

Transacting:

- Bike Cottage Country
- Fall Fuel & Fun
- JackRabbit Referral System

Product Development:

- Self Guided Mobile Tours (Group of Seven, Cycling, Craft Beer, Paddling)

Coish discussed 2016 marketing priorities; will stay the course. Will continue to publish exceptional content that serves the Ontario Explorers segment as well as specific niche markets pertaining to product development. While we continue to focus on the discoverers, we will target the searchers as well; increase our focus on converting visitors to leads. We will maintain exceptional site traffic by focusing on increasing its quality and the number of outbound referrals. Will also focus on converting visitors and nurturing consumer leads to heads in beds. Increase in cost factored into goals for upcoming year, drive same number of visitors to the site with increased outbound referrals to operators.

Discussed the marketing objectives for 2016 which include publishing 100 pieces of content (this is our advertising), driving 860k visitors to the site and pushing out 245k outbound referrals, as well as adding 6k leads to the email database. Coish also mentioned how email frequency will increase with onboarding of content writer; we will be able to deploy more often with new content to each of the segmented personas. Also, new email lists will be created based on content already consumed on the site.

Coish spoke to technologies on the radar for optimizing EE.ca for mobile; FB Instant Articles (requires technology change on our website, looking into this), Google Accelerated Mobile Pages, and Yoast SEO. Also discussed leveraging FB Lead Ads (FBLA); pre-populated ads that load up your information on FB to convert visitors more quickly, cost effective way to acquire leads – lead capture is done in a way that is CASL compliant.

## **Motion to Accept Changes to TPA for Budget Spends in regards to Marketing Initiatives**

**Motion:** Curt Dunlop

**Seconded:** Hilary Chambers

**Discussion:** n/a

**Carried.**

## **Executive Director Update – James Murphy**

ED Murphy discussed human resource changes for 2016-2017; new staff onboarding for Communications Coordinator position and Tourism Administrator maternity leave position. Also discussed partnership reconciliations for 2015-2016 in the provincial budget; 18 projects and 12 separate consultants. Discussed the Muskoka Airport; working with District of Muskoka, Town of Gravenhurst and InterVistas. Consultations ran April 11-15, 2016; 61 online surveys completed and 200 face to face consultations.

Fiscal Year End; piloting new reporting template for MTCS, final report extension to May 31, and hiring of third part to assist with the completion of the report. As far as financials, discussed the change in auditor, and work including preparation of invoices, contracts, and bank reconciliation; an electronic vote will be sent out in early June.

ED Murphy discussed project and consultant onboarding. The International Marketing Project included a kick off meeting with Enterprise Canada and Twenty 31; priority currently is Twenty 31 and package and itinerary development, Enterprise is slated to begin development in July 2016. RTO12 projects included working with strategist Peter Coish of Kuration on annual marketing plan (including budget), photography development, PR overview (work back schedule and development), and Tourism Excellence North pilot project (Fast Track to Success).

Organizational update was discussed; Governance Committee developed and worked with Nominations Committee, and Tourism Operator Relations Committee coordinated 28 partnerships. Meeting planning is also underway for the AGM on June 22<sup>nd</sup> at Hidden Valley Resort and Airport Presentation on June 23<sup>rd</sup> at the District of Muskoka offices.

## **Ministry Update – Laura Hernando**

Strategic framework sessions have wrapped, as well as online sessions, consultant is now tallying all of the data collected which will be compiled with a report and next steps which will come out soon. New deputy minister, all changes reported at last meeting; staff members have all moved back to their previous positions. Attended a meeting at the Ontario Trails Council in the GB area; OTC is actively seeking opportunities to work with tourism organizations in a way to elevate and promote tourism trails as a product. Tourism Week is coming up at the end of June; discussed events in Barrie and Toronto. Georgian Bay Coastal Route meets today in Parry Sound to discuss action plan; integrating product, working to become a more solidified group to promote their region. Celebrate Ontario announcements came out; over 200 events were funded, 5 from our region – Festival of the Sound, Band on the Run,

Girlfriends Getaway Weekend, Muskoka Chautauqua, and Huntsville Festival of the Arts (full list can be found on the Ministry website).

ED Murphy discussed high level action items, including:

- Complete Committee Restructuring
- Draft MTCS Letter
- Audit
- Final Report
- Partnerships – 18 Projects (MOUs, Product Development & Contracts)
- AGM
- Industry Communication

### **Tourism Excellence North Presentation – Karen Tait-Peacock**

Presentation is an update on the progress of the TEN programs, year one was April 2015-March 2016; funding for the program came in in December on 2015. Mentioned the management committee, as well as funding partner representatives. Peacock discussed the TEN Deliverables she has been working on. Registration tools for the program are available online, can show how products you already have can be enhanced, helps assess market readiness for product, visitor assessment tools, etc. Once you complete the 4 self-assessment tools, you can transfer your comments and scores to your action plan.

Case studies will be available online by this summer, with two more to follow in this fiscal year. Also discussed best practice missions, hiring of consultants, pilot communities (Kenora and EE) in this fiscal year; fast track to success forms have been developed, consultant will work with specific operator to provide feedback on what is going well and what can be improved upon. Laurel Reid is the hired consultant.

Discussed three TEN Orientation Sessions; bringing brokers (someone from a government or municipal agency) for an orientation and training session, teach them how to use the self-assessment tools to be a resource to operators. Operators work through this process incrementally. TEN outreach to date includes 22 presentations by Karen, 1,193 individuals reached, 1 media interview, and 4 sponsorship opportunities. TEN participants to date; 16 operators registered and 13 industry/businesses registered. To date, concentration has been on training brokers and reaching individuals with information about the program and assessments. Discussed the next steps in the program, including TEN tools (self-assessments, group learning and personalized coaching), master training to develop orientation training, TEN specialist and broker orientation sessions, web portal launch, and continued outreach.

### **Tourism Operator Relations Committee: Partnership Presentation – Jeff Suddaby**

Suddaby discussed the focus of the partnerships programs and the five areas of funding; International Marketing, International Destination Development, Workforce, Content Marketing, and Festivals & Events.

*Conflict of Interest*

## *Reported*

*Directors were asked to declare if they had any conflicts of interest relating to partnership programs.*

*Curt Dunlop, Owner of Griffin Gastro-pub and Gary McMullen declared a conflict of interest as it relates to the craft beer partnership.*

*Jeff Suddaby, owner of 3 Guys and a Stove and Board and Board Director of the Huntsville Chamber of Commerce declared a conflict of interest as it relates to the Huntsville Chamber of Commerce partnership.*

*Hilary Chambers, owner of Pine Grove Resort declared a conflict of interest as it relates to the Loring Restoule Signage and content development.*

In total, 28 requests came in for allocation information and process, 22 were brought forward to the committee; 18 in total as recommendations for the Board of Directors for Approval.

### *International Marketing:*

- Market Development New Audiences: \$35,000
- Destination Development Packages and Itineraries: \$14,000

### *Workforce:*

- Tourism Excellence North: \$42,000

### *Content Marketing:*

- Loring Restoule Trail Content: \$5,000
- Kee to Bala 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary: \$2,000
- Meetings in Muskoka: \$5,000
- SantaFest: \$1,500
- Parry Sound Tourism: \$5,000

### *Festivals & Events:*

- Fire & Ice Festival: \$5,000
- What's Cooking Bracebridge: \$5,000
- Muskoka Autumn Studio Tour: \$5,000
- Girlfriends Getaway Weekend: \$5,000
- Muskoka Maple Festival: \$5,000
- Session Muskoka: \$10,000
- Great Muskoka Paddling Experience: \$1,000

### *Product Development – Requires TPA Amendment:*

- Georgian Bay Biosphere Way Finding Signage: \$4,700
- Loring Restoule Way Finding Signage: \$4,380
- Craft Beer Strategy: \$2,820

ED Murphy discussed the current FedNor partnership situation and how this affects upcoming international marketing and destination development program and the risk involved. If FedNor pulled proposed funding for set projects (\$125k), cost would be taken from core funding (most likely marketing dollars). The committee recommendations touch on the project as a catalyst for airport discussions and the risk would jeopardize the airport program; discussed how stakeholders share the desire to explore new markets. FedNor approval will retroactively cover expenses from April 1, 2016 onward; alternative is the spend would come from core funding.

**Motion to Accept Risk to Core Funding (from Marketing Budget) if FedNor Spend Does Not Come Through for Partnership Project Spends (as currently allotted in TPA)**

**Motion:** Andy Vitch

**Seconded:** Curt Dunlop

**Discussion:** n/a

**Carried.**

**Motion to Accept Slate of Proposed Partnership Projects**

**Motion:** Andy Vitch

**Seconded:** John Miller

**Discussion:** n/a

**Carried.**

ED Murphy discussed comprehensive funding applications brought to the table (blanket funding requests) by both the Huntsville/Lake of Bays Chamber of Commerce and MTMA. The Huntsville/Lake of Bays Chamber of Commerce requested 30k for a total of 9 events; piloting a sub-regional model of event marketing and development. Committee recommendations states that the RTO had set a precedent this year for working directly with event organizers, and that they would continue to explore the model further with Muskoka stakeholders via the Community Relations Committee. Two events were approved for partnership including the Girlfriends Getaway Weekend and Muskoka Maple Festival. ED Murphy discussed the second comprehensive marketing funding application from Muskoka Tourism, requested 36k for general marketing; two fold, Meetings Muskoka and Content Marketing & SEM Marketing. Committee recommendations state that the RTO articulate a plan for corporate travel and present to MTMA BOD, and pass on content marketing & SEM marketing portion of the proposal. The RTO has funded this type of initiative in past years with MTMA; discussed a lack of communication and dialogue with MTMA, as well as the lack of a marketing plan, operational plan, and budget to the RTO.

**Governance Committee: Nomination Committee Recommendations – Anthony Rizzo (via conference)**

Thanked contributors (Don MacKay, Dave Gray and Susan Poole) for help with reviewing nominations. Committee motion was made to put forth three new directors; Rob Wallace (Foxwood Resort), Karina White (Muskoka Shores Cottages) and Michael Simonett (Sherwood Inn and Rocky Crest). Newly slated directors will be brought forth at AGM for members to vote on.

**Motion to Accept Three Proposed New Directors**

**Motion:** Curt Dunlop



**Seconded:** Hilary Chambers  
**Discussion:** n/a  
**Carried.**

**Motion to Adjourn**

**Motion:** John Millers  
**Seconded:** Hilary Chambers  
**Discussion:** n/a  
**Carried.**

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