

TICO Readiness



Analyzing Content Marketing Initiatives For Success!

September 3, 2024

Executive Summary

Commissioned by the CEO, this report presents a comprehensive evaluation of Explorers' Edge's recent online content campaigns, with a focus on analyzing specifically **the volume of traffic, engagement metrics and referral sources pertinent to invested spend, including partnerships.**

The report was triggered in response to two important events:

- 1) EE's pursuit of licensing by the Travel Industry Council of Ontario (awarded in July 2024)
- 2) The Value-For-Money Report (VFMR) by the Ontario Auditor General (December 2023), which had specific recommendations for multiple government-funded stakeholders, including the RTOs.

Regarding the VFMR, Explorers' Edge (EE) supports TIAO's statement on the findings for "the need to better leverage existing tourism assets, partnerships, and resources to realize the full potential of Ontario's tourism industry."

While TIAO assumes a stated role of producing a "forward looking growth strategy" for the provincial tourism sector (not yet sanctioned by the industry), EE will strengthen its own innovative Regenerative Tourism Strategy by ensuring integral marketing campaigns are both cost efficient and impacting for this region.

To that end, analyses of EE's participation in the content partnerships with the provincial tourism marketer (Destination Ontario) in comparison to EE's own content programs were conducted pertinent to all content in Fiscal 2023-2024 and in Q1 of Fiscal 2024-2025.

This analysis was intended to provide insight into how EE can ensure the success of the TICO program, and also support the Ministry of Tourism, Culture & Gaming in its response to the VFMR, specifically (as stated on Page 5) in reference to:

- growing the tourism industry
- coordinating efforts between regional tourism organizations and Destination Ontario to ensure efficiency and an effective regional approach to promoting tourism
- improving program design, funding criteria and evaluation to ensure the best return on investment and
- improving data sharing and research to facilitate planning and strategy

As previously stated, this assessment to improve Value-For-Money investment coincided with EE developing innovative, strategic marketing programs to ensure the success of the company's new travel agency initiative.

In anticipation of TICO licensing, EE staff began testing innovative marketing approaches that will ensure the success of EE's new regional online travel agency (OTA), while also working to eliminate significant duplication in the domestic market. The overall purpose of EE's marketing plan is to attract high yield visitors to the region and to the province.

With its new travel agency designation, EE will introduce an outcomes-based system to measure direct economic impact of tourism on provincial revenue, as well as regional tourism businesses, employees and communities.

TICO Readiness Content Marketing Analyses: Context

The main objectives of the following analyses are:

1. to ensure effective risk management by Explorers' Edge (EE) Board and CEO
2. to assess future investment in marketing partnerships pertinent to Value-For-Money principles.

As stewards of public funds and strategic investments, it is crucial that EE's initiatives demonstrate a clear ROI and alignment with our overarching goals. (A review of the efficacy of EE's annual Partnership Program, a pan-RTO initiative that originated with EE, will also be undertaken by the end of the fiscal year.)

This report is prepared for submission to the EE Board of Directors as well as to the Ministry of Tourism, Culture & Gaming to inform decision-making and ensure continued accountability and transparency in EE's operations.

EE undertook the following content marketing comparison analyses between in-house campaigns vs. partnership campaigns with Destination Ontario (DO).

- Fiscal 2023-2024 DO domestic campaigns (Spring Campaign/Winter Campaign) vs. EE's in-house content
 - \$25K DO / \$25K EE for each campaign: total partnership spends = \$100K
- Q1 Fiscal 2024-2025 DO international campaign (US Drive Markets) vs re-deployed in-house content campaign
 - \$50K DO / \$50K EE for campaign: total partnership spend = \$100K
 - Re-deployed content = \$5K

In each analysis, pertinent to EE's overall objectives, we analyzed results pertaining to:

- 1) Volume of Traffic
- 2) Engagement
- 3) Referrals

Comparative Evaluation: Rationale

By benchmarking the overall performance of EE's in-house campaigns against participation in programs with DO, we can establish a clearer picture of what constitutes success within our specific business context.

This internal benchmarking process is essential for setting realistic and achievable goals for future campaigns. It allows us to identify trends, capitalize on strategies that have proven effective, and avoid those that have not delivered the desired outcomes.

In this way, the evaluation not only measures the success of a single campaign but also informs the development of best practices that can be applied across all future initiatives.

Explorers' Edge Measurable Objectives for Analysis

Volume of Traffic

Total Views: Measure the absolute number of views each campaign/tactic generates, indicating its capacity to attract site traffic.

PCT of Views: The contribution of each channel/source to the total views, highlighting its relative importance in driving traffic.

Average Cost / View: The relative cost efficiency of generating referrals. For the analysis, total spends for the DO campaigns have been used (and not just the EE portion of the spend).

Engagement

PCT of User Engagement (SEC): Total active time spent by users on a page, reflecting depth of interaction with the content.

Average User Engagement (sec): Average time each user spends showing how captivating the content is on an individual level.

Bounce Rate: A lower bounce rate suggests visitors engage with more than one page indicating greater interest.

Referrals

Total Referrals: The number of clicks to external links indicated how effectively the channel source driver operator traffic.

Referrals Cost / Referral: the relative cost efficiency of generating referrals for this analysis total spends for the DO campaign have been used (and not just the EE portion of the spends).

For the definition of User Engagement

- <https://support.google.com/analytics/answer/11109416?hl=en>

1. Fiscal 2023-2024 Comparison

Table 1: Content KPIs by Campaign and Tactic

Campaign / Channel	Tactic	Investment	Active Users	Views	PCT of Views	Average Cost / View	Bounce Rate	Total User Engagement (sec)	PCT of User Engagement	Average User Engagement (sec)	Average Cost / Second of User Engagement	Referrals	PCT of Referrals	Referrals / M Views	Cost / Referral
Destination Ontario	PPC	\$44,421	377,203	456,449	37%	\$0.10	93%	585,319	5%	1.6	\$0.08	1,283	1%	3	\$34.62
	Social	\$50,595	74,007	92,565	7%	\$0.55	84%	705,566	7%	9.5	\$0.07	7,109	7%	77	\$7.12
	Other	\$6,404	7,835	9,387	1%	\$0.68	73%	201,107	2%	25.7	\$0.03	270	0%	29	\$23.72
	Total	\$101,420	459,045	558,401	45%	\$0.18	91%	1,491,992	14%	3.3	\$0.07	8,662	8%	16	\$11.71
In-house Content	Social	\$81,629	275,755	346,837	28%	\$0.24	84%	2,787,430	26%	10.1	\$0.03	40,413	38%	117	\$2.02
Organic	N/A	N/A	99,690	167,660	14%	N/A	38%	4,068,786	38%	40.8	N/A	39,096	37%	233	N/A
Referral	N/A	N/A	63,983	118,869	10%	N/A	76%	1,561,301	15%	24.4	N/A	12,761	12%	107	N/A
Direct	N/A	N/A	23,388	47,879	4%	N/A	67%	728,554	7%	31.2	N/A	5,901	6%	123	N/A
Other	N/A	N/A	201	330	0%	N/A	69%	5,513	0%	27.4	N/A	36	0%	109	N/A
Total		\$126,050	922,062	1,239,976	100%	N/A	81%	10,643,576	100%	11.5	N/A	106,869	100%	86	N/A

Analysis

Volume of Traffic

The PPC channel via Destination Ontario drives the highest traffic volume, contributing 70% of page views from May 1 to July 22, at a cost per view of just 30 cents. DO's social (Meta) tactics deliver traffic at a cost per view of 61 cents. Overall, the cost per view for DO is now 36 cents - this includes the DO investment. This is 100% higher than the cost per view of the DO campaign undertaken last year.

The in-house content campaign contributes 8% of traffic FYTD. It uses the same tactics as DO's social campaign, at a cost per view of 36 cents.

Engagement

The DO campaign accounts for 70% of traffic but only 19% of user engagement on the site. Average user engagement is just 2.1 seconds, with a cost per second of engagement of 21 cents. The average bounce rate is 92% (See Table 1). The average user engagement is 33% lower than it was for previous DO campaigns.

The In-house campaign performs much better. It accounts for 8% of traffic and 13% of user engagement. Average user engagement in seconds is seven times higher at 14 seconds, with a cost per second of engagement of 3 cents and an average bounce rate of 81%.

Referrals

The in-house content campaign is significantly more efficient in generating referrals, with 116.7 referrals per thousand page views and a much lower cost per referral of \$3.13. It accounts for 18% of referrals. Compare this to DO, with only 2.3 referrals per thousand page views and a cost per referral of \$153. DO accounts for just 3% of all referrals. The performance of the DO's PPC tactic has continued to underperform.

2. US Market Drive Markets Spring/Summer 2024

Table 1: Content KPIs by Campaign and Tactic (May 1 to July 22)

Campaign	Tactic	Investment	Active users	Views	PCT of Views	Avg Cost / View	Bounce rate	Total User Engagement (sec)	PCT of User Engagement	Average User Engagement (sec)	Average Cost / Second of User Engagement	Referrals	Referrals / M Views	Cost / Referral
Destination Ontario	PPC	\$70,000	187,474	230,111	58%	\$0.30	91%	395,058	15%	2.1	\$0.18	364	2	\$192.31
	Meta	\$30,087	44,119	49,174	12%	\$0.61	96%	83,720	3%	1.9	\$0.36	291	6	\$103.39
	Total	\$100,087	231,593	279,285	70%	\$0.36	92%	478,778	19%	2.1	\$0.21	655	2	\$152.80
Direct		N/A	6,041	13,193	3%	N/A	68%	163,143	6%	27.0	N/A	1,194	91	N/A
In-house Content	Social	\$11,273	24,744	30,921	8%	\$0.36	81%	343,585	13%	13.9	\$0.03	3,607	117	\$3.13
Organic		N/A	25,983	42,541	11%	N/A	39%	972,778	38%	37.4	N/A	8,819	207	N/A
Other		N/A	557	750	0%	N/A	69%	9,039	0%	16.2	N/A	127	169	N/A
Referral		N/A	14,744	31,174	8%	N/A	62%	605,740	24%	41.1	N/A	5,576	179	N/A
Total			303,662	397,864	100%	N/A	84%	2,573,063	100%	8.5	N/A	19,978	50	N/A

Discussion

While PPC is a strong driver for traffic volume, our in-house content campaign again delivers superior performance as measured by user engagement and referral generation.

In table 2b, we examine **what other pages DO traffic visits while on the site**. Of the total 280K pageviews, 270K, or 96%, were on the two pieces of promoted content. DO campaign visitors only went to view another 5,145 pages on the site. However, engagement time on those pages was significantly higher than the two primary pieces: 25 seconds versus just 1.7 seconds on the promoted pages. This indicates the importance of campaigns delivering referrals from our campaign page.

Table 2b also shows the pages the DO traffic was interested in. The top pages are directory pages, such as the home and blog pages.

Note that the page with the highest engagement remains the Resorts of Ontario post, with an average user engagement time of 115 seconds - 60+ times higher than the two primary promoted pages. This again indicates the importance of generating visits that will lead to subsequent referrals.

In table 3b, we examine what other pages in-house content campaign traffic visits while on the site. Of the total 36K pageviews, 33K, or 91%, were on the pieces of promoted content. In-house Content Campaign went on to view another 2,903 pages on the site. However, engagement time on those pages was significantly higher than the two primary pieces - 60 seconds versus 12 seconds on the promoted pages.

Every page view generated directly by the DO campaign generates **an additional 0.01 page views**. Every page view generated directly by the in-house content campaign generates an additional 0.09 page views, a rate that is 9X higher.

Conclusion / Outcomes

While Destination Ontario (DO) campaigns effectively drives traffic volume (quantity), our in-house content campaign continues to outperform in critical areas such as user engagement and referral generation (quality). The data highlights a stark contrast between the two approaches; DO visitors primarily engage with the promoted content, but with minimal exploration of additional pages and low engagement times on those initial pages. In contrast, visitors from our in-house content campaign demonstrate not only a higher propensity to explore other content on the site but also with significantly higher engagement times.

The analysis shows that every page view from the in-house campaign leads to 9 times more additional page views compared to the PPC campaign, indicating deeper interaction and interest from these users. This suggests that our in-house content not only attracts visitors but also encourages them to engage more deeply with our website, driving more value per visitor.

Given these insights, Explorers' Edge opted to cancel a Fall Partnership with DO and to instead invest the budget into the launch of a Fall culinary campaign with a strategy to continue to prioritize quality over quantity. With the establishment of our Regenerative Travel Agency, it is imperative that our resources are directed towards efforts that move consumers further down the purchase funnel, ensuring that our marketing investments lead to meaningful and measurable outcomes. This strategic shift will allow us to better align our campaigns with our long-term objectives and deliver greater value for our stakeholders.

Though participating in DO programs can be enticing in terms of cost efficiencies (particularly 0.50 cent dollars), the subsequent results do not currently yield outcomes that are worth the investment by Explorers' Edge.

Though DO's content campaigns generate a far greater volume of visits to Explorers' Edge campaign page, Explorers' Edge in-house content generates lower bounce rate, higher engagement, and significantly higher referral traffic once users land on the content, resulting in deeper engagement with overall content on the site, and ultimately, cost efficiencies (i.e. Value-For-Money).

Of particular note is that the US traffic generated by DO content campaigns had lower engagement. This may be the result of many factors, but it suggests that Explorers' Edge, with its new "Communities of Interest" marketing strategy, may be able to deepen awareness, engagement and conversion with US and overseas markets using new in-house approaches. This hypothesis will be tested in Q3 of Fiscal 2024-2025.

Travel Agency Conversions: Content CTA Test

With the motorcycle content campaigns, in both the Destination Ontario (DO) - promoted content and the re-deployed domestic campaign, Explorers' Edge inserted a call to action for users to join a product-specific "travel Zoom" featuring motorcycle touring experts for the region.

This CTA was an important test to determine which content marketing approaches best serve the Explorers' Edge new directive of getting leads for future package and itinerary purchase (to move travelers down the purchase funnel), which is a priority for the new travel agency, and which will be massively important leading up to the re-introduction of the Ontario Northland train service.

15 users signed up in total, with 5 registrants resulting from the DO campaign (\$25K+ spend) and 10 resulting from Explorers' Edge in-house efforts (\$5K spend US markets, \$1K spend domestic).


Results from the DO campaign may suggest that American audiences are just not aware of our region/market/product, but because we re-deployed the campaign to the same markets with a considerably smaller budget and got higher engagement and referrals, this suggests that going Direct-To-Consumer with in-house campaigns that are less of an investment is less risky value-wise.

Travel Agency Conversions: Content CTA Test

**Join Us for More Travel Planning Info:
The Explorers' Edge Vroom Zoom on May 14, 2024**


Explorers' Edge is the regional tourism organization for [the great Canadian wilderness just north of Toronto](#). Interested in learning more about our region, the awesome roads, and all the epic things to see and do in this neck of the Ontario woods? [Join us for a special "Vroom Zoom" event](#) when our staff and two motorcycle journalists will answer your questions about riding in these parts. By the time we all gather, our rider will have been out to do his annual "Ride The Edge Check" – an annual ride and report on the state of our Top Roads. He'll share his observations – as well as any new-found places to stop. [Click here to sign up for the Zoom](#), and be sure to include any questions you have for planning your visit.


For more information on the great [Canadian wilderness just north of Toronto](#), click here. To plan your stay, [click here](#).




Travel Agency Conversions: Content CTA Test

Destination Ontario Motorcycle Touring Campaign

		<h2>Website Traffic</h2>			Feb 1, 2024 - Mar 30, 2024	
Page title	Views	Users	PCT of Views	Avg User Engage (s)	Bounce	
Motorcycle Touring in the Gre...	123,928	107,859	34%	1.3	93%	

		<h2>Referrals</h2>			Feb 1, 2024 - Mar 30, 2024	
			Page Views / Referrals			
Page Title			Page Views	Referrals		
Motorcycle Touring in the Great Canadian Wilderness Just North of Toro...			123,928	233		


Explorers' Edge Motorcycle Touring Campaign



Website Traffic

Apr 1, 2024 - May 20, 2024

Page title	Views	Users	PCT of Views	Avg User Engage (s)	Bounce
Paddling Adventures & Outdo...	108,698	97,152	70%	1.4	93%
Motorcycle Touring in the Gre...	4,516	4,167	3%	5.0	89%



Referrals

Apr 1, 2024 - May 20, 2024

Page Views / Referrals		
Page Title	Page Views	Referrals
[Redacted]	[Redacted]	[Redacted]
Motorcycle Touring in the Great Canadian Wilderness Just North of Toro...	4,516	174

Important Note:

Explorers' Edge is grateful to Destination Ontario for its investment in regional tourism via their new Paddling/Cycling and Motorcycle Touring campaigns in particular, which presented an innovative approach by the provincial marketer. We would be pleased to participate further in programs like these, with the caveat that we would be able to customize targets and platform delineation to increase engagement and referrals to serve our business objectives.

Thanks also to the team at Destination Ontario, who were extremely accommodating in making custom adjustments to their campaigns per our request, allowing Explorers' Edge to understand the impact of our investment. 50/50 partnerships continue to be of interest to Explorers' Edge if an approach can be determined to increase engagement and referrals.

Tables

Table 2a: Results by Page for Destination Ontario (May 1 to July 22)
This table shows the posts that were promoted during the period.

Page Title	Views ▼	PCT of Views	Average User Engagement (sec)	PCT of User Engagement	Bounce rate
The Great Canadian Wilderness Just North of Toronto: Summer's Epic Getaway	185,844	68%	2.1	78%	91%
Paddling Adventures & Outdoor Fun	89,379	32%	1.1	22%	94%
Just North of Toronto, Ontario					
Grand total	275,223	100%	1.7	100%	91%

Table 2b: Results by Page for Destination Ontario (May 1 to July 22)

This table shows the other posts that were visited by traffic generated by the Destination Ontario Campaign

Page Title	Views ▼	PCT of Views	Average User Engagement (sec)	PCT of User Engagement	Bounce rate
Home - The Great Canadian Wilderness	2,364	46%	15.2	32%	14%
Privacy Policy - The Great Canadian Wilderness	565	11%	15.2	8%	26%
Read On & Discover More! – The Great Canadian Wilderness	299	6%	17.8	6%	8%
Welcome Visitors!	235	5%	35.6	8%	7%
The Sacred Experience of a Traditional Pow Wow	97	2%	25.7	3%	4%
Outdoor Adventures Archives – The Great Canadian Wilderness	94	2%	25.0	2%	23%
Get That Amazing Job in the Great Canadian Wilderness Just North of Toronto The best time	78	2%	20.3	2%	11%
Hiking We Will Go! Thousands of Kilometres of Trails to Explore North of Toronto	70	1%	23.0	2%	33%
Iconic Canadian Resorts Just North of Toronto	68	1%	115.1	7%	17%
Regions - The Great Canadian Wilderness	65	1%	30.5	2%	16%
Motorcycle Touring in the Great Canadian Wilderness Just North of Toronto	63	1%	4.7	0%	95%
Epic Events & Family Fun: Winter Adventures Just North of Toronto	54	1%	0.0	0%	100%
You searched for - The Great Canadian Wilderness	49	1%	15.7	1%	3%
Parry Sound: The Bay & Beyond – The Great Canadian Wilderness	47	1%	18.9	1%	20%
Page Not Found - The Great Canadian Wilderness	46	1%	6.2	0%	26%
Stay - The Great Canadian Wilderness	39	1%	8.8	0%	17%
Grand total	5,159	100%	24.5	100%	21%

Table 3b: Results by Page for In-house Content (May 1 to July 22)

This table shows the other posts that were visited by traffic generated by the In-house campaign

Page Title	Views [▼]	PCT of Views	Average User Engagement (sec)	PCT of User Engagement	Bounce rate
Home - The Great Canadian Wilderness	283	9%	46.3	14%	10%
Stay - The Great Canadian Wilderness	135	4%	21.9	3%	2%
Regions - The Great Canadian Wilderness	134	4%	20.1	3%	2%
Events Archive - The Great Canadian Wilderness	120	4%	35.3	4%	7%
Offers Archive - The Great Canadian Wilderness	95	3%	34.8	2%	0%
Iconic Canadian Resorts Just North of Toronto	86	3%	144.8	13%	7%
Privacy Policy - The Great Canadian Wilderness	74	2%	17.0	1%	9%
Bed & Breakfasts North of Toronto: A Warm Summer Welcome Awaits	71	2%	63.6	5%	4%
Loring-Restoule - The Great Canadian Wilderness	66	2%	41.5	2%	3%
Camping Archives - The Great Canadian Wilderness	63	2%	47.2	2%	0%
Cottage Resorts Archives - The Great Canadian Wilderness	62	2%	43.8	2%	6%
Camping & Glamping Just North of Toronto	50	2%	31.5	2%	4%
Almaguin Highlands - The Great Canadian Wilderness	48	2%	44.0	2%	0%
Maps And Directions - The Great Canadian Wilderness	42	1%	18.7	1%	3%
Hiking We Will Go! Thousands of Kilometres of Trails to Explore North of Toronto	41	1%	29.9	1%	63%
Resorts Archives - The Great Canadian Wilderness	40	1%	37.0	1%	0%
Grand total	3,007	100%	61.7	100%	13%

Table 3a: Results by Page for In-house Content (May 1 to July 22)

This table shows the posts that were promoted during the period

Page Title	Views ▼	PCT of Views	Average User Engagement (sec)	PCT of User Engagement	Bounce rate
Discovering the ghost roads of Ontario's Cottage Country	7,603	23%	14.2	27%	85%
Summer Ships: Take a Cruise in Ontario's Cottage Country	4,989	15%	16.5	19%	67%
Paddling Adventures & Outdoor Fun Just North of Toronto, Ontario	4,204	13%	5.7	6%	85%
The Great Canadian Wilderness Just North of Toronto: Summer's Epic Getaway	3,697	11%	7.8	7%	81%
The Beat Goes On in Ontario's Cottage Country: Live Music Summer 2024	3,664	11%	27.9	23%	72%
Craft Brewing is Booming in Ontario's Cottage Country	3,464	10%	2.9	3%	93%
Visit Almaguin To Get To Algonquin	1,677	5%	8.6	4%	83%
Amazing Places & Spectacular Spots: West Parry Sound In Spring	1,558	5%	11.5	4%	77%
Motorcycle Touring in the Great Canadian Wilderness Just North of Toronto	1,456	4%	6.0	2%	87%
Port Loring & Restoule: O The Grid as Nature Intended	1,302	4%	12.0	4%	78%
Grand total	33,614	100%	11.9	100%	81%

Table 4b: Markets Traffic (May 1 to July 22)

This table shows the meager engagement by US users. Many factors can influence this, it should be noted; but the takeaway is room for improvement through all content approaches.

Country	Total users	PCT of Total Users	PCT of User Engagement
United States	103,674	75.3%	19%
Canada	33,157	24.1%	77%
United Kingdom	194	0.1%	1%
Germany	134	0.1%	+0%
Indonesia	128	0.1%	+0%
Grand total	137,707	100.0%	100%