

Marketing and Eco Business Inventory and Gap Analysis

WHITE PAPER SUMMARY OF MARKETING EFFORTS DURING YEAR 2 OF THE VIRGINIA OYSTER & WATER TRAILS ECOTOURISM PROMOTION PROJECT

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MANAGEMENT PROGRAM



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Connecting locals and visitors to world-class ecotourism destinations. That's the mission of the Virginia Water Trails initiative.

But to drive real change and real impact on the world-class ecotourism destinations of rural coastal Virginia, which the Virginia Water Trails program serves, you must do more than connect. You must incentivize people to visit. You must drive them to care. You must inspire them to action.

The construction and launch of the Virginia Water Trails initiative, program and web site does just what its mission statement proposes – connects people to destinations.

In an effort to enhance the linkages between visitors and residents to available blue-green assets, scenic views, local culture and history, as well as local retail centers and restaurants, the Middle Peninsula Planning District Commission set out on a year-long effort to inventory the assets available in the region, analyze gaps, develop an initial digital marketing campaign to drive awareness to the region, brand the place, and then tell – and measure the effectiveness of – the distribution of a marketing and communications effort across various channels.

While the execution and review of the specific deliverables of this effort seem simple when viewed in totality – tell stories about the region and educate the community on digital platforms – the approach was extremely strategic.

To develop a sense of place that people want to visit, become ambassadors for, and do business in, you must tell the stories of that place. Its history. Heritage. People. Food. Destinations. Events.

The strategy came in looking at the inventory of assets in the region, analyzing the gaps and opportunities and developing a marketing and communications initiative that would benefit the core mission of the Virginia Water Trails while also helping foster economic growth for the region, foster conservation practices, educate and engage the community.

The objective of this document is to showcase how an inventory and gap analysis of assets in the Middle Peninsula region in support of the Virginia Water Trails initiative was used to strategically develop, execute and measure the effectiveness of an initial digital marketing outreach campaign. These efforts resulted in short term gains and showcased evidence indicating continued investment and study would set the program – and region – up for long term success and greater gains.

BUSINESS INVENTORY AND GAP ANALYSIS

GO Virginia is a bipartisan, business-led economic development initiative that is changing the way Virginia's diverse regions collaborate on economic and workforce development activities.

The Middle Peninsula Planning District Commission is part of the Mary Ball Washington Regional Council, known as Region 6, comprised of the city of Fredericksburg; and the counties of Caroline, Essex, Gloucester, King and Queen, King George, King William, Lancaster, Mathews, Middlesex, Northumberland, Richmond, Spotsylvania, Stafford, and Westmoreland.

Middle Peninsula Planning District Commission staff worked directly with the Region 6 staff on the recent development of the 2017 and 2019 Mary Ball Washington Region 6 [Growth and Diversification Plan](#). The development of this Economic Growth and Diversification Plan included four distinct components: 1) Initial Data Collection and Analysis, 2) Plan Development/Stakeholder Engagement, 3) Growth Sector Analysis and 4) Final Plan Development. The plan focuses on economic trends analyzed by the industry base of the region(s) using an eight-factor Economic Performance Index within the Mary Ball Washington Region and sub-regional Planning Districts (Middle Peninsula, Northern Neck, George Washington). The process identified 16 high performance industry clusters in the region, which included analysis and growth potential for tourism and natural resource and water-based industries.

The 16 clusters were then consolidated into six priority industry clusters, which included natural resources-based industries such as aquaculture, seafood, resiliency and other water-based industries – key areas present on the Middle Peninsula and related directly or indirectly to the Virginia Water Trails initiative. The Region 6 Growth and Diversification Plan serves as the foundation for assessing gaps and opportunities to grow targeted industries.

Additionally, Middle Peninsula Planning District Commission staff, working with Region 6 staff, developed the Regional Entrepreneurial Assessment Project conducted by TEconomy in 2018 (govirginia6.org/). The study was an analysis of the entrepreneurial ecosystem within the region and made recommendations for activities to develop the entrepreneurial pipeline, which included improving and expanding “high-growth” startup programming as well as “local-growth” startup programming for industry clusters that are directly and indirectly related to the Virginia Water Trails initiative.

Among the goals and recommendations in the Growth and Diversification Plan included the following:

- expand, diversify, and modernize the high-performance natural resource-based industries throughout the region
- provide an adequate supply of appropriately trained and educated workers for employers looking to grow their companies in the region
- reduce the number and percentage of workers commuting to higher-paying jobs in neighboring metropolitan areas
- increase tourism expenditures and employment above the state average annual increase.

Recommendations were directly tied to strengthening the region in areas of entrepreneurship, business scale-up and the water-based economy, among others.

When reviewed alongside the Virginia Water Trails initiative, these opportunities for growth in the regional economy seem possible if stronger focus was placed on the gap areas and a stronger picture of the opportunities in the region were shored up.

In short, the current inventory of assets – like recreation and employment opportunities around the water trails – and the gaps of what’s available in the market present opportunities. The Middle Peninsula region will continue to analyze the market opportunities and anticipates moving in the direction of conducting a location quotient analysis.

A Location Quotient is a way of quantifying how concentrated an industry or even a particular demographic group is within an area compared to the country as a whole. Utilizing the Location Quotient is a powerful way to identify growth opportunities and comparative regional advantages around a desired industry cluster.

SPECIFIC MARKETING DELIVERABLES

The marketing initiative in support of Virginia Water Trails – Middle Peninsula included the following deliverables, all designed to showcase recreation opportunities around the water trails, educate and engage the community about the region, foster conservation and restoration strategies and provide public information. Marketing deliverables for the Middle Peninsula portion of the Virginia Water Trails site were designed to push and pull information to consumers and businesses to improve and enhance the user experience, as well as to educate and elicit public comment. Multiple communication platforms were used and open for public engagement. Outreach focused on recreational opportunities, conservation/restoration strategies, general public information needs, trip planning, general education, community engagement, trail warnings and maintenance and map enhancements.

Highlighted Communications Strategies included the following:

- Creation of a Virginia Water Trails – Middle Peninsula Facebook page and social media management of the account. Facebook was visualized as a key social media and communication channel given that second only to YouTube, according to the Pew Research Center, 68% of all Americans use Facebook online or on their phone. This supported the need to provide public information and engage the community in an effective manner.
- Creation of a Virginia Water Trails – Middle Peninsula Instagram profile and social media management of the account. Instagram, according to the Pew Research Center, is the next fastest growing social media channel. This marketing initiative needed to be built on a foundation of public information and engagement, set up for today’s consumers, as well as tomorrow.

- Compilation of video and photo assets to utilize on the various digital communication channels promoting the Virginia Water Trails – Middle Peninsula. Whether it’s anchoring the core elements of web page, utilized as an element with a press release, published with a blog post or shared on social media, visual assets are key to any marketing plan. It is also key to showing the impact conservation can have on a place. Developing a library of imagery and videography that Virginia Water Trails – Middle Peninsula was a key focus area to ensure the communications and execution of the marketing initiative included all elements needed for success. Furthermore, statistics show on social media channels that content shared on social media that includes photos and/or videos are engaged with at a higher level.
- Development of an editorial calendar that outlined the contents and topics for 30 blog posts to be researched, written, published and distributed via the Virginia Water Trails – Middle Peninsula communication channels. Ten of the blog posts, in light of the America’s 250th in 2026, include and expand on Virginia Indian culture in the Middle Peninsula region. This editorial calendar did not focus solely on water trails themselves, rather the elements of the region that make up the complete picture of the place. The editorial calendar was also developed to highlight and expand on the topics identified in the gap analysis and in the Growth and Opportunity Diversification Plan.
- 30 blog posts as outlined in editorial calendar. These blog posts were then shared with media outlets and across social media with the drive being to get people to the new Virginia Water Trails web site to learn more about the Middle Peninsula, sign up to join the email database or connect directly with the organization (or the organizations noted in the content).
- Construction of a digital web page to promote businesses that elect to partner with the Virginia Water Trails – Middle Peninsula program. Given that key recommendations in the Growth and Opportunity Diversification Plan included building stronger entrepreneurial ecosystems and growing the tourism base of the region, this effort aimed to test an ability to more directly connect the successes of businesses and the blue/green assets of the region.
- Creation of a Virginia Water Trails – Middle Peninsula email database. Email marketing continues to deliver a strong return on investment for marketers. According to DMA (Designated Market Area) in 2018, for every \$1 spent on email marketing, organizations can expect \$32 in return. While that statistic is more apt to relate to a consumer-focused organization – a business that sells things – the sentiment remains the same. Email converts and before Virginia Water Trails – Middle Peninsula can use this channel for marketing, it must first have email addresses to send to.
- Press release announcing the Virginia Water Trails – Middle Peninsula asset and interaction map for the community to use.
- Develop a plan to coordinate a “paddle and pub crawl” event on the Middle Peninsula to promote the Virginia Water Trails, support businesses and showcase the potential for growth of the tourism sector in the region.

MARKETING INITIATIVE RESULTS

SOCIAL MEDIA

- FACEBOOK: Built up a community of 748 followers on Facebook.
 - <https://www.facebook.com/VirginiaWaterTrailsMiddlePeninsula/>
- INSTAGRAM: Built up a community of 51 followers on Instagram.
 - <https://www.instagram.com/vawatertrails/>

CONTENT

- PHOTOGRAPHY VISUAL ASSETS: Secured usage rights of professional imagery of the region that depicts the waterways, uploaded to the media gallery of the Middle Peninsula page of the Virginia Water Trails site.
 - <https://viriniawatertrails.org/middle-peninsula/>
- VIDEOGRAPHY VISUAL ASSETS: Sizzle reel video developed of rural coastal Virginia waterway and tourism assets.
 - <https://www.facebook.com/VirginiaWaterTrailsMiddlePeninsula/videos/vl.3202244489802246/962135470835981/?type=1>
- CONTENT MARKETING: Published a total of 44 blog posts related to the Middle Peninsula.
 - <https://viriniawatertrails.org/category/middle-peninsula/>

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM PILOT

- BUSINESS PROMOTION: Developed pilot to promote businesses that elect to partner with the Virginia Water Trails – Middle Peninsula program.
 - <https://viriniawatertrails.org/marker-nine-to-support-public-access-and-recreation-along-the-virginia-water-trails-on-the-middle-peninsula/>
 - This promotion was done as a pilot program to showcase how businesses in the region with a connection to the water trails and recreation areas could develop a partnership with the program to both boost its business operations as well as contribute to the effort to make the place marketing of the region and its assets sustainable. Marker Nine, a casual apparel company, offered to donate a percentage of sales to the organization – Middle Peninsula Chesapeake Bay Public Access Authority – that oversees much of the publicly accessible waterways in the region. While a small, family-owned business, the promotion resulted in at least three sales online tied directly to the Virginia Water Trails. The pilot concept was needed to ensure that the business messaging for product sales could be aligned within the Virginia Water Trails site. It is anticipated that several more pilots will be needed before a solid plan for corporate partnership and water trails site integrations can be institutionalized. This pilot was critical

to building a successful corporate model for revenue generation to sustain the site.

OUTREACH

- EMAIL DATABASE: Built up a community / database of 95 subscribers (opt-in).
- PRESS OUTREACH: Press release announcing the Virginia Water Trails – Middle Peninsula asset and interaction map for the community to use.
 - <https://www.dailypress.com/blogs/dp-ugc-article-new-interactive-web-site-highlights-middle-pe-2019-03-03-story.html>

EVENT PLANNING

- PADDLE and PUB CRAWL EVENT planning materials compiled for future event hosting.

WEB SITE (Analytics for Time Period of Jan. 1 – Dec. 10, 2019)

The Virginia Water Trails site was built to be measured and includes back-end site data generated and tracked by Google Analytics, an industry standard. As a result, the Middle Peninsula pages and content were able to be analyzed by number of visitors, where those visitors came from, how they interacted with the site and more. Based on user needs and experiences, the data will help drive future direct messaging and communication channel development.

- 5,539: total users site wide
- 6,905: total sessions site wide. A session is defined as a group of interactions one user takes within a given time frame on your website.
- 10,858: total pageviews site wide. A pageview is defined as a view of a page on your site that is being tracked by the Analytics tracking code.
- Of the top 10 most visited pages site wide, six pages were related to the Middle Peninsula. The top most visited page was the homepage.
- Of the top 50 most visited pages site wide, 38 were related to the Middle Peninsula.
- Social media remained the top acquisition channel (49.78%) for visitors to the web site.
- Nearly 100% (99.78%) of social media traffic to the web site came from Facebook.
- Of the top 10 locations site visitors came from, all were either outside of the rural coastal Virginia area or were from the Middle Peninsula, indicating that the content marketing and audience did draw on locals and visitors alike. The top geographic areas visitors came from were Virginia Beach, unknown, Gloucester Point, Richmond, Newport News, Ark, Williamsburg, Ashburn, Tappahannock and Charlottesville.

ANECDOTAL MEASUREMENTS

In at least two specific instances, blog posts were researched, written and published on the benefit of visiting specific food destinations on the Middle Peninsula – one restaurant in

Mathews County and one gas station with a food counter in the Guinea community of Gloucester County. In both instances, the owners and leadership of the businesses reported to the Virginia Water Trails – Middle Peninsula team that customers commented on seeing the story about their business on social media and that it drove new business in the door.

NEXT STEPS

Focusing on a sense of place, connecting potential visitors and locals with a wide variety of activities on the Middle Peninsula, all tied in some way to the waterways, and communicating those stories across a wide variety of channels resulted in positive traction and results for the region – measured by web site traffic, pilot business partnership effectiveness and social media community growth.

Recommended next steps to build on this initial program include the following:

- Continue content marketing and storytelling through the blog of the Virginia Water Trails web site. Develop a 12-month editorial calendar to support.
- Continue social media management.
- Drawing on lessons from the initial business partnership pilot, develop formal parameters for how businesses can partner with the Virginia Water Trails and support the sustainability of the program.
- Plan and execute the Paddle and Pub Crawl event. The Paddle and Pub Crawl event is envisioned to be a promoted event on the Middle Peninsula that encourages paddlers and water recreation activity followed by visits to the region's growing breweries.
- Launch email marketing as core communication channel to showcase content marketing from web site, promote events and drive further engagement on social media. Email marketing launch should come with the execution of promotions to get more subscribers as part of the database and include giveaways as enticement.
- Explore the use of Location Quotient to maximize, incentives and encourage new eco related business startup opportunities.