



Assessment Findings and Suggestions Report

Bellingham & Neighboring Communities
July, 2015



Opportunity Assessment

INTRODUCTION

In July of 2015, an Opportunity Assessment of Bellingham and parts of Whatcom County, Washington, was conducted, and the findings were presented in a two-and-a-half hour workshop. The assessment provides an unbiased overview of the area - how it is seen by a visitor. It includes a review of local marketing efforts, signage, attractions, critical mass, retail mix, ease of getting around, customer service, visitor amenities such as parking and public restrooms, overall appeal, and the community's ability to attract overnight visitors.

In performing the Opportunity Assessment, we looked at the area through the eyes of a first-time visitor. No prior research was facilitated, and no community representatives were contacted except to set up the project. The town and surrounding area were "secretly shopped." Any person looking to relocate their business, industry, or residence will come to your community and area as a visitor first. Tourism is the front door to all your economic development efforts.

Once potential visitors find information about your area, are the marketing materials good enough to close the sale? In the Marketing Assessment, we reviewed your visitor website and print marketing materials.

A typical community has five opportunities to close the sale:

- 1) Personal contact (visitor information centers, trade shows, etc.)

- 2) Websites
- 3) Brochures and printed materials
- 4) Publicity (articles)
- 5) Word of mouth - the most effective means

We searched the internet for activities, requested and reviewed printed materials, and looked for articles and third-party information. As we prepared for travel to Whatcom County, we searched both commercial and organizational websites promoting the area, tourism websites, and read travel articles and guidebooks.

The marketing assessment determined how effective the marketing was in convincing a potential visitor that the area would be worth a special trip, a stop, or an overnight stay. The key to the marketing assessment is to see if you have a primary lure that makes you worth a special trip of a one-hour drive - or from further away. The question on most visitors' minds is: What do you have that I can't get closer to home? What makes you worth a special trip?

Where most communities falter is when they merely provide "lists" of what the community has, whether it's truly "unique" or not. Nearly every community in North America promotes the usual list of diversions: local museums, shops and restaurants, plenty of lodging, golf, outdoor recreation, historic downtowns, scenic vistas, etc. Of course, nearly every visitor can do these things closer to home. So, what makes Bellingham and Whatcom County worth the trip?

Always promote your primary lure first - what makes you worth that special trip. THEN, promote

your diversionary, or “complementary” activities. Would you go to Anaheim, California, if Disneyland wasn’t there? Do you think that Universal Studios and Knotts Berry Farm mind that Disneyland gets all the glory? Of course not. Eighty percent of all tourism spending is with those secondary activities. Disney does the heavy lifting in terms of advertising and promotion, and the diversionary activities benefit.

In a nutshell, the Marketing Effectiveness Assessment looks for what makes your community worth a special trip, or a great place to live, or to do business. We look for details. Do you give a reason for visiting, and do you provide enough information to make it easy to plan a trip? Are the marketing materials good enough to close the sale?

The second part of the assessment process is the On-site Assessment. During this part of the assessment, we spent more than a week in the area, looking at enticements from highways and freeways (signs, billboards, something that would get a visitor to stop), beautification and overall curb appeal, wayfinding (ease of getting around), visitor amenities (public restrooms, visitor information, parking), activities, overall appeal, retail mix (lodging, dining, shopping), critical mass, customer service, area attractions, pedestrian friendliness, gathering spaces, evening activities, and the availability of marketing materials and their effectiveness.

The area benefits from tourism when visitors spend money, and they do that in the local gift shops, restaurants, hotels, etc. Therefore, the On-site Assessment includes a candid look at private

businesses as much as public spaces and amenities.

For every shortcoming or challenge we note during the assessment process, we provide a low-cost “suggestion,” where possible, on how the challenge can be corrected or overcome. The suggestions are not termed “recommendations,” as they were developed without consulting the community first about possible constraints, future plans, or reasons why the suggestions may not be appropriate. Hopefully this assessment process will open dialogue within the communities, leading people to adopt some or all of the suggestions, taking them from suggestions to recommendations.

It’s important to note that to increase the tourism industry, fulfilling one or two of the suggestions may have little impact, but implementing a number of them, if not all, can have a profoundly successful impact on the area’s ability to tap into the tourism industry.

Implementation of these suggestions must be a region-wide effort, involving both privately owned businesses as well as local, county, and state agencies, where appropriate. Every local organization plays a role in tourism, downtown revitalization, or economic development efforts. A Destination Marketing Organization (DMO, CVB, Chamber, TPA, etc.) will not be successful if the tourism effort is not region-wide.

In many cases, issues may come up that you are already aware of and are already working on. In that case, the assessment validates those efforts. But more often than not, the assessment will point out things that you are aware of but can’t mention



or bring up without paying a political price. Local politics can be a killer of the tourism industry.

While marketing efforts are important, product development is the most important factor of a successful tourism industry. Visitors want activities, not just things to look at. How much time can a visitor spend enjoying activities - that cater to their interests - in your area? Does your community have truly unique attractions the visitor can't get closer to home? You must be able to deliver on your marketing promises – otherwise visitors might come once, but they won't come back. It's much more cost effective to bring people back, than to always go out and entice new visitors into town. "Been there, done that" communities eventually run out of visitors and find they don't have a sustainable tourism industry, or they simply become pit stops or gateways on the way to somewhere else.

After spending several days reviewing marketing materials and assessing the region, we have looked at all of these issues, and have developed some suggestions and ideas the area can discuss and possibly implement to help increase tourism spending.

SUCCESSFUL TOURISM TRANSLATES TO CASH

Tourism is successful when the community imports more cash than it exports. When residents spend their hard-earned money outside the community, the community is exporting cash – often referred to as "leakage." Tourism helps fill that gap, importing cash into the local economy without the necessity of having to provide extended social and other services. Visitors come, spend money, then go home. When you import more

cash than you export, you have a positive "balance of trade." Communities with successful tourism programs easily see that the industry subsidizes the community, whereas other communities find that they subsidize visitors – providing services visitors use without them leaving enough money behind to cover the cost of those services.

The primary goal of the tourism industry is to bring more cash into the local economy. This doesn't happen when visitors come into the community, get out of their cars, and take photographs. And it doesn't happen when visitors go swimming in the lake at your park all day, sunning, and eating the lunch they brought from home. And it doesn't happen when visitors hike down your trails, enjoy your interpretive centers, or stroll through your lovely arboretums. These are all great things to do, and, of course, you do want your visitors to do these – but, you also want to entice them into your shops, your cafes, espresso stands, restaurants, galleries, B&B's, and hotels, ultimately opening their wallets to make purchases. That is what helps your local economy, your small merchants, your hoteliers, and your tax coffers.

To entice visitors to spend money in your community, you need to have places for them to spend it – you need to have the right mix of shops, restaurants, entertainment, and lodging facilities, all in an attractive setting, as well as attractions that make them want to visit you in the first place.



THE THREE TYPES OF TOURISM

1. Visiting friends and family

The number one reason people travel is to visit friends and/or family. If you did nothing to promote tourism, you would still have tourism in your community. However, when friends and family come to visit, do your residents take them out to eat, shop, dine locally? Or do they head to a neighboring community? Do your locals even know what you have to offer? An effective tourism marketing effort also includes educating locals as to what you have and how to find it through effective wayfinding signage, gateways and advertising.

2. Business travel

The second most popular reason for travel is business. Included in this category is educational travel: colleges and universities, as well as conventions and meetings, corporate travel, vendor travel, etc. Like leisure travelers, this group is looking for things to do “after hours” while in the area. The most successful convention and trade show towns are the result of their secondary activities or “diversions,” not simply because of their convention and exhibition facilities. Think Disneyworld, Disneyland, San Antonio’s River Walk, and Banff, to name a few.

3. Leisure travel

The third, and most lucrative of all types of visitors, is the leisure traveler. They have no personal connections to the community, but are coming purely to enjoy themselves. They stay in commercial

lodging establishments, eat virtually all their meals in local restaurants, and their top diversionary activity is shopping and dining in a pedestrian-friendly setting.

The average leisure visitor is active 14 hours a day, yet typically only spends four to six hours with the primary lure. They then spend eight to ten hours with diversionary activities - things they could do closer to home, but will do while in the area. A good example of this is Branson, Missouri, the “live music-theater capital of the world.” This town of 6,500 residents hosts 7.5 million visitors a year.





The primary “lure” is the 49 music theaters. The average visitor attends two shows a day over about four hours. During the other hours of the day, the visitor will shop in local outlet malls, head to the water parks, theme parks, and other attractions, play a round of golf, hike, bike, fish, do some bird watching, and participate in any number of other activities they could do closer to home, but will do while visiting Branson.

THE THREE STAGES OF TOURISM

1. Status quo

If you take no action to develop the tourism industry, you will still have an element of tourism, simply because some travelers will pull off local highways or freeways for gas, food, or lodging, as well as the fact that the number one reason for travel is to visit friends or family. If you have residents, you will have some tourism.

2. Getting people to stop

The first priority of developing a successful tourism industry is getting people to stop. Imagine how successful businesses in the community would be if just 50% of the vehicles traveling through pulled off the highway and spent just 30 minutes in your community – buying gas, an ice cream cone, a sandwich, a gift or souvenir?

If there’s a strong pull, imagine the money spent if visitors stayed two hours in the community, which nearly always translates to additional spending.

The first goal is to get those travelers to stop.

3. Becoming the destination

To become a destination community you must have

attractions and supporting amenities that convince visitors to spend the night. And those attractions must be different from what the visitor can get closer to home.

Overnight visitors spend three times that of day visitors, and nearly ten times that of visitors using your community as a pit stop on the way to somewhere else.

THE FOUR-TIMES RULE

Visitors will make a point of stopping or staying in a community if it has enough activities that appeal specifically to them and will keep them busy four times longer than it took them to get there.

In other words, if a person has to drive 15 minutes to visit you, do you have enough for them to do to keep them busy for an hour? (4 times 15 minutes) If a visitor has to drive an hour, do you have the activities and amenities to keep them busy for four hours?

The more you have to offer, collectively, the further visitors will come, and the longer they will stay, and of course, the more they will spend. This is why it is so important for communities to market more than just their immediate geographic areas. By marketing neighboring activities and attractions, you present much more for a visitor to do, and you make the visit worth the trip.

Visitors don’t care about city limits or county lines – so market the broader package and you’ll be able to keep people in the area long enough to translate to another meal, some more shopping, and hopefully, an overnight stay.

SELL THE EXPERIENCE, NOT GEOGRAPHY

Nearly every destination marketing organization is charged with promoting a geographic area, yet visitors couldn't care less about those boundaries. They are looking for activities that cater to their interests, and location is second to the experience. ALWAYS promote the primary lure first, then the location. People by the millions head to Disneyland, Disneyworld, Dollywood and other attractions. They are not going to Anaheim, Orlando or Pigeon Forge.

Always sell the activity - the experience - THEN the location.

LURES, DIVERSIONS AND AMBIANCE

Too often communities promote the list of diversions that nearly every community has. The primary lure is the activity that a visitor can't find closer to home.

Always promote your primary lure, then the diversions. Do not try to be all things to all people. Have you ever gone anywhere because they had "something for everyone?" Of course not - you go there because they have something specific for you. Find your niche and promote it like crazy.

Historic downtowns provide ambiance - they are not attractions, diversions, nor are they a primary lure. It's what's in the buildings that makes a downtown a destination.

The same can be said for scenery. Unless your vista is a world-class scene, such as Niagara Falls or the Grand Canyon, scenic vistas create wonderful ambiance, but don't translate to spending, and they only last a few minutes. Then what?

All too often communities promote their heritage as a primary draw. How far would you travel to visit a mining museum? A timber museum? An agricultural center? A county historical museum? Heritage must be outstanding and pervasive throughout the community to be a primary lure, such as Plimoth Plantation or Salem, Massachusetts.

Thousands of communities are the "capital" of something. For instance, in California, Borrego Springs is the grapefruit capital of the world. Gilroy is the garlic capital. Modesto is the tomato capital. Gridley is the kiwi capital. Oxnard is the strawberry capital. Fallbrook is the avocado capital. But here's the question: Have you ever gone anywhere because it was the capital of a fruit or vegetable?

Your local heritage is important to the community and can set the ambiance, even becoming a diversionary activity. For local heritage to be a major attraction, it needs to combine activities with ambiance, and it needs to be pervasive throughout the area.

BE DIFFERENT OR THE BEST

Why should a visitor come to your community if they can enjoy the same activities closer to home? Too many communities promote "outdoor recreation" as their primary draw. Unfortunately, that is the same attraction promoted by nearly every community in North America.

If you are different, then you have a reason for travelers to choose to visit you. If you are the best, then visitors will generally flock to your doors.

If you have great hiking trails, then market their unique qualities. Be specific and paint the image





of how wonderful they are in the minds of your potential visitors. If you have one fantastic restaurant in town, let people know about it – a unique dining experience is something many people will travel far to enjoy.

Ashland, Oregon, previously a depressed timber town, began its Shakespeare Festival, which now runs nine months of the year and draws hundreds of thousands of visitors who spend an average of six nights in the community. The Shakespeare Festival made Ashland different from any other community.

Leavenworth, Washington, another dying timber town, adopted a Bavarian architectural theme and produces dozens of Bavarian events every year. Some now say the town looks more genuinely Bavarian than towns in Bavaria. It is now one of the primary tourist destinations in Washington state, hosting more than 2.5 million visitors annually. They offer a different experience, an experience that is pervasive throughout town.

Okanogan County, Washington is an outdoor recreational paradise – just like 37 of the 38 other counties in Washington. So why go to the Okanogan? Because they are the best. They researched guidebooks, newspaper and magazine articles, and pulled quotes they could use in their advertising efforts. Like, “Pinch yourself, you’re in Okanogan Country with perhaps the best cross country skiing on the continent.” This, and other quotes like it, make it worth the drive to visit Okanogan Country. The third-party endorsements show that they are the best.

Set yourself apart from everyone else, and you’ll see that by being unique, you’ll be a greater attraction.



CRITICAL MASS MEANS CASH

Although it may not be the primary reason why visitors come to your community, shopping and dining in a pedestrian setting is the number one activity of visitors. Besides lodging, it is also how visitors spend the most amount of money.

Do you have a pedestrian-friendly shopping district? If not, can you create one? Many communities have been highly successful with the development of a two or three block long pedestrian “village” including visitor-oriented retail shops, dining, visitor information, restrooms, etc., all in an attractive, landscaped setting.

The general rule of thumb in those two or three blocks (not spread out all over town) is 10+10+10: Ten destination retail shops, which includes galleries, antiques, collectibles, home accents and furnishings, artists in action, book stores, logo gear (clothing), souvenirs, outfitters, tour operators, activity shops such as kites, jewelry, wine or tobacco shops, and other specialties. The second ten is for food: ice cream, fudge and candy stores, soda fountains, sit-down dining, coffee shops, cafes, bistros, delis, etc. And the final ten are businesses open after 6:00 pm. This includes entertainment: bars, dance clubs, theaters (movies and performing arts), retail shops with activities (piano bar in a wine shop), etc.

The important point is to group these businesses together to create the “critical mass” in a pedestrian-friendly setting. This will attract visitors as well as locals, and make it worth their while to stop and shop. People are always drawn to the critical mass –

the opportunity to have multiple choices, multiple experiences, all in a convenient and attractive setting.

TOURISM IS AN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITY

The goal of successful tourism is for people to come into the community, spend money, and go home. Tourism is nearly a \$650 billion dollar industry in the U.S., nearly \$75 billion in Canada, and supports millions of jobs. Ninety percent of tourism industry businesses are small businesses, of which 90% have less than 15 employees. Tourism provides the opportunity for entrepreneurs to get started, for small family-run businesses to thrive, and for artisans and craftspeople to find a market. It creates the basis for a unique niche-retail environment including wineries, artists, crafts, etc. Tourism provides a diverse market within the community, expanding its potential. Enhancing the community through beautification efforts creates an attractive setting for both locals and visitors, key in revitalizing a community's downtown. And a tourism-friendly town will attract non-tourism industries faster than others – new businesses will see the community as a visitor before they make a final determination about the community. Tourism is the front door to your other economic development efforts.

The benefits of a healthy tourism industry can rejuvenate a town, foster community pride, encourage economic diversity, and lead the way to a vital, successful community.



NEXT STEPS

The findings and suggestions in this report will provide many ideas, strategies, and goals to reach for. We hope that it fosters dialogue and becomes a springboard for the region in enhancing the tourism industry and other economic development efforts, leading to greater prosperity, rejuvenation, and enjoyment by all the citizens.

This report offers a first step in reaching that goal. To fully realize the benefits of this assessment, the communities should take these findings and suggestions, discuss them and evaluate them, and develop a plan for implementation.

A detailed branding plan would help to build on the results of this assessment, adding in-depth research, evaluation, and local input to develop a unique brand and implementation program. The assessment process essentially provides a look at where you are today. RBI's BrandCamp program helps build your branding plan from the ground up - with local input, brainstorming, research, and creative planning. We can work with you to guide you through the process, helping create a plan that has local champions and community buy-in.

The next step in the planning process would be to provide public outreach and review past and current planning efforts. This would help determine your goals as a region.

The third step would involve research, feasibility and market analysis, and determining your brand - what you are or hope to be known for.

Then comes the "development" portion of the plan or the "how to get there" program: determining

what product development initiatives need to be undertaken to reinforce and grow the brand. This also includes defining the roles of the various local organizations. Brand-building takes a village - everyone pulling in the same direction, each with their own "to do list."

Finally, there's the detailed marketing plan: how and when you will tell the world who you are and what makes you special - the place to live, work and play.

The branding plan should be an "action plan" as opposed to a "strategic plan." You want a to do list, by organization, not just general strategies, goals and objectives.

The recommendations should provide all the necessary steps for you to be successful in attaining your goals of a more diverse economy with an enhanced tourism industry and to become more attractive and enjoyable for both visitors and citizens.

A good plan will provide a program to get local residents and the business community pulling together, building the area's unique image in the minds of visitors and residents alike. The result of your efforts will be a prosperous, enjoyable environment in which to live, work, and visit.





Findings & Suggestions



The primary goal of tourism development is to increase the amount of cash that is “imported” into the community. Fortunately, many of the same ingredients that make a destination attractive to visitors also make the community attractive to residents and new business development - and investment - making it a better place to live, work, and play.

This is not just about tourism, but tourism is the front door to your non-tourism economic development efforts. During this assessment, we examined 60 key elements about Bellingham and its neighboring communities.

A little background - I grew up on San Juan Island, and started my career in tourism by helping develop Whistler Resort. I spent a lot of time traveling along I-5, passing through Bellingham and Whatcom County, but I never stopped to visit except to see friends and family. I think very few people in the Seattle area realize all that Whatcom County has to offer as a destination.

Whatcom County is an incredibly beautiful area, and we found that there are many places that are great destinations for visitors, as well as being wonderful places to live and do business.

The Whatcom County Conundrum

To win
 You MUST promote private-sector activities.
 You must promote BUSINESSES specifically.



Whatcom County is beautiful, but we found a number of challenges:

- Challenge #1 - You have so much to offer, and you market everything, including lakes, rivers, scenic drives, outdoor recreation, trails, wineries, shopping, marinas, nice towns, ferries, the arts, history, fishing, golf, casinos, events, Salish Sea, mountains, beaches, Native American influence, farmers markets, spas, and more. The problem with this is that nearly every place in western Washington can promote most of these as well. You cannot win by trying to be all things to all people. You don't stand out from the crowd.
- Challenge #2 - You need to shift your marketing away from promoting ASSETS to promoting ACTIVITIES that are worth a two-hour drive and an

overnight stay.

- Challenge #3 - You rely too heavily on Canadian visitors.
- Challenge #4 - No one says "Let's check out Whatcom County."
- Challenge #5 - The most successful destinations are built on private sector investment, not public sector assets and amenities.

We started out by trying to find things from the highways and freeways.
 Suggestion #1: Work with DOT on freeway signage to make sure people know which exits to take.



Suggestion #2: Your top priority should be to develop a county-wide wayfinding system.

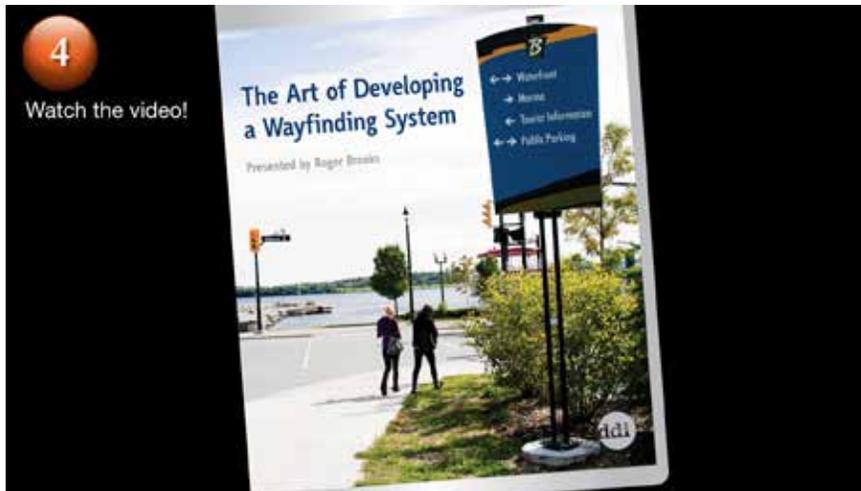
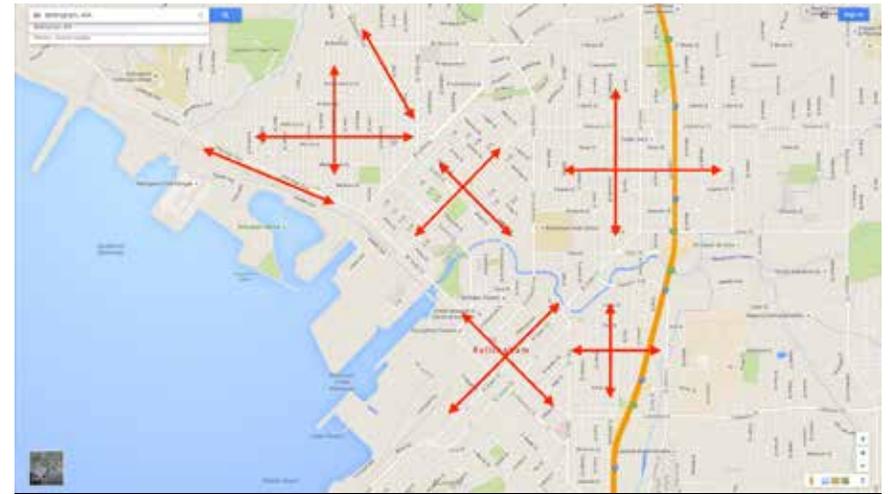
A wayfinding system includes:

- Gateways & entries into the communities
- Attractions & activities
- Amenities (parking, restrooms, visitor information)
- Trail markets and access points
- Visitor information kiosks
- Pedestrian wayfinding (downtowns)

Wayfinding signs should have no more than five items on a sign. They should always be decorative and work with the community's brand.

Note this wayfinding sign in Pittsburg, California (top left). It is decorative, easy to read, and fits the community's brand. This sign in The Woodlands, Texas (top right) fits the community's ambiance as well.

We were happy to see Fairhaven's wayfinding signs (bottom left). It is also important that wayfinding signage "connect the dots" all the way to the end. We never could find the "outdoor sculpture" mentioned on this sign (bottom right).



Always make signage easy to read and avoid condensed text or script lettering. Wayfinding signage should be easy to read and follow. Almost every destination identified on signs on I-5 were lost once you leave the freeway. The follow-through directional signage was not continued to the destination. There was no signage on I-5 southbound for visitor information.

We have an entire video on wayfinding systems in our video library, and we recommend you watch it for more helpful information (bottom left).

A good wayfinding system will educate residents and visitors about what assets Whatcom County has. It will increase local spending, overnight stays, and tourism revenues. I-5 alone sees more than 25 million people a year

driving right through your communities. The lack of a good wayfinding system means you are barely monetizing this terrific asset's potential. It is very difficult to find anything in Whatcom County because of the lack of wayfinding. Bellingham isn't on any type of grid system (top right), making it even more difficult.

Work with the state, county, and every city to create a task force. Collectively apply for federal transportation grants for design and implementation of a wayfinding system; develop a pro-rata share to divide the costs appropriately.

I thought I was on Chuckanut Drive (bottom right) here, but it turned out this wasn't it.

5

Visitor info kiosks

- At each state park
- At major trail heads
- In each downtown (two or three locations)
- Ferry terminals
- Border crossings
- Transit | Train stations
- At tourism-based businesses



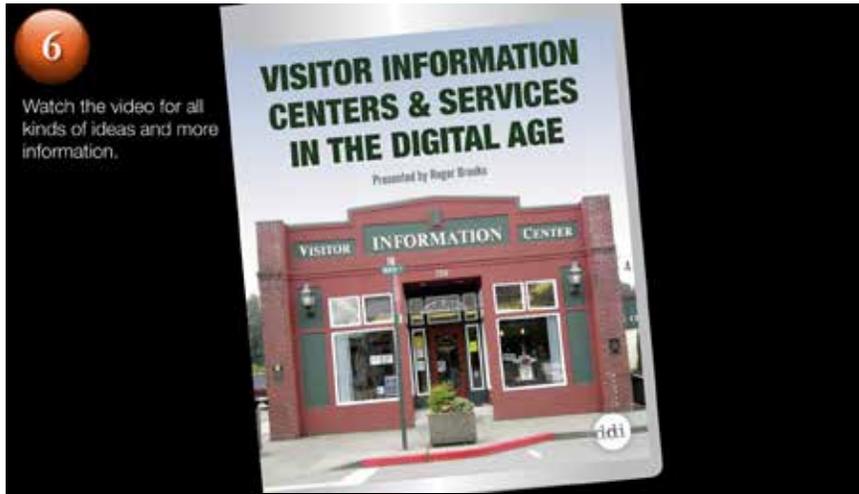
Add visitor information to several areas around the county. Small, unmanned kiosks are excellent for this purpose.

This small kiosk in Moses Lake, Washington, (top right) provides information about not-to-be-missed attractions in the area. It was created by volunteers.

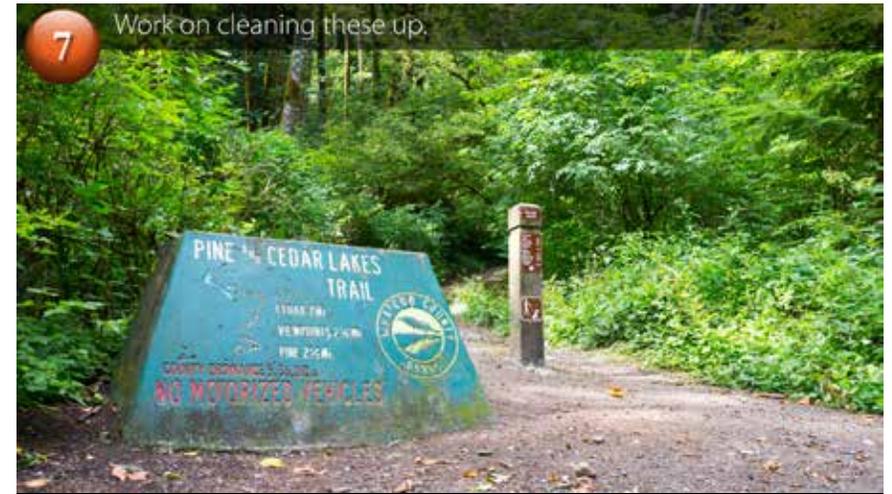
This visitor information kiosk (bottom left and right) is a great example of a kiosk that fits the ambiance of the town. This includes brochure distribution (bottom right), and each business or attraction that displays their brochure

pays \$5 each month, which covers the cost of restocking, maintenance, and a little more to go for building another kiosk.

Place visitor information kiosks all around the county - make it easy for your visitors to learn what you have to offer and to cross-sell other attractions and amenities in the area. The more you have to offer, the longer people will stay, and the more money they will spend.



6 Watch the video for all kinds of ideas and more information.



7 Work on cleaning these up.



8 Include trail signage as part of the wayfinding system.



9 You need to market this. What a great place for stand-up paddle boarding.

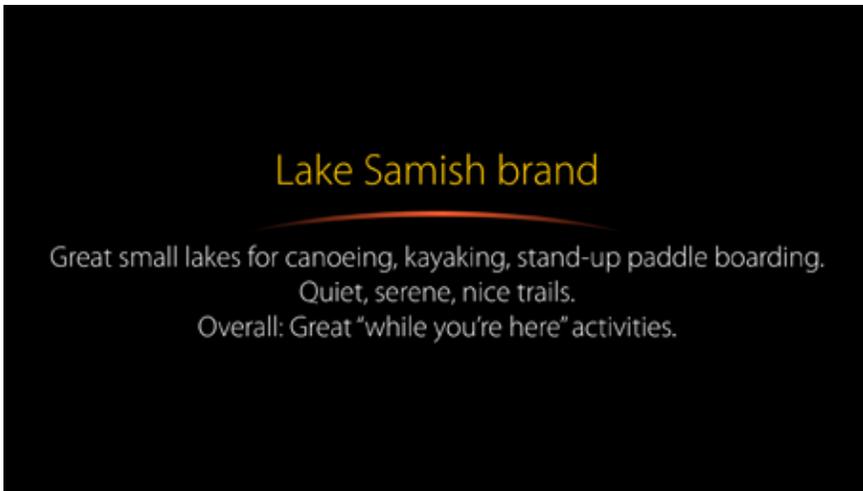
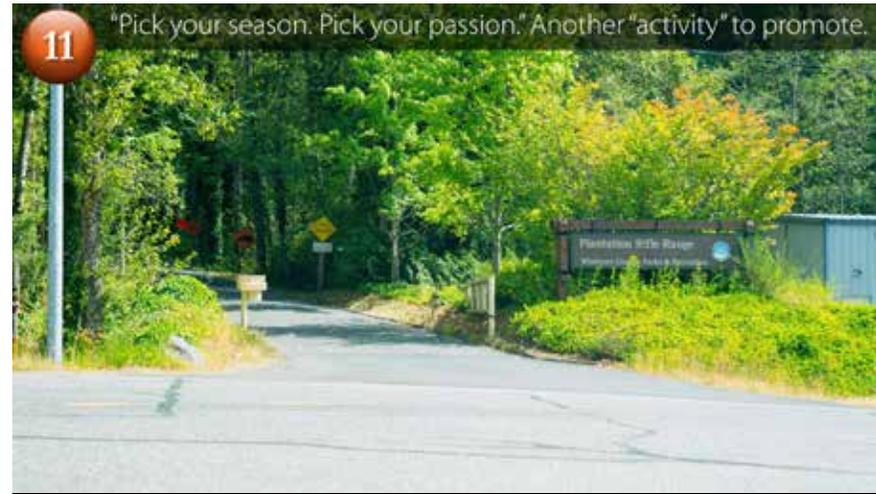
For more information, watch our video about visitor information centers in our online library (top left).

Make sure to maintain your signage, so that it is clean, easy to read, and attractive. These signs (top right) could use some clean-up.

Trail signage is important to encourage visitors (and residents) to use these attractions. By providing trail markers and information including distance, level of difficulty, any amenities, etc., you make it easier for people to plan a trip and

enjoy the parks and trails.

We thought we were on Chuckanut Drive, but it turns out we were going beside Lake Samish, and we found some great places. As we drove around Lake Samish, we saw the park (bottom right). This is a beautiful spot, and it's a great place for boating and paddle boarding. This should definitely be marketed specifically.



Lake Samish is a beautiful spot for relaxing outdoor recreational activities, such as canoeing and hiking easy, scenic trails. Consider promoting it by the season, and by the specific activities for each season.

It's important to have visitor information accessible for people when they're done with hiking the trails and enjoying the great lakes in the area. Make it easy for your visitors, provide more than just park information - provide brochures to cross-sell activities, shops, and dining.

Since what I thought was Chuckanut Drive was actually Samish, I went out the next day to find the REAL Chuckanut Drive. My friend told me Highway 11 is Chuckanut! Add Chuckanut Drive to the sign (bottom right). Make it easy for visitors!



Fairhaven Park’s entry looks like it used to be stunning (top left), but it’s been allowed to deteriorate. Be sure to keep your entries looking fresh and updated. People judge the book by the cover, and a tired entry gives the impression that the park is run down.

We came across the Chuckanut Bay Gallery (top right), and it’s a great shop. Be sure to promote your “anchor tenants” specifically. Your “anchor tenants” are your very best businesses or attractions that people would go out of their way specifically to visit. You need to promote them.

No shopping mall is successful without anchor tenants. The other businesses benefit by being in close proximity to the anchor tenants. One example is Disney World in Orlando. There are lots of other attractions in Orlando, but most people visit to go to the anchor, Disney World, and they see the other attractions while there. Anchor tenants are just as important for towns. People come for the anchors, and other businesses all benefit.

Promote your anchor tenants with a “Best Of” guide. It can have a dramatic impact on visitor spending. This sample from Alpena, MI (bottom right) is a great example.

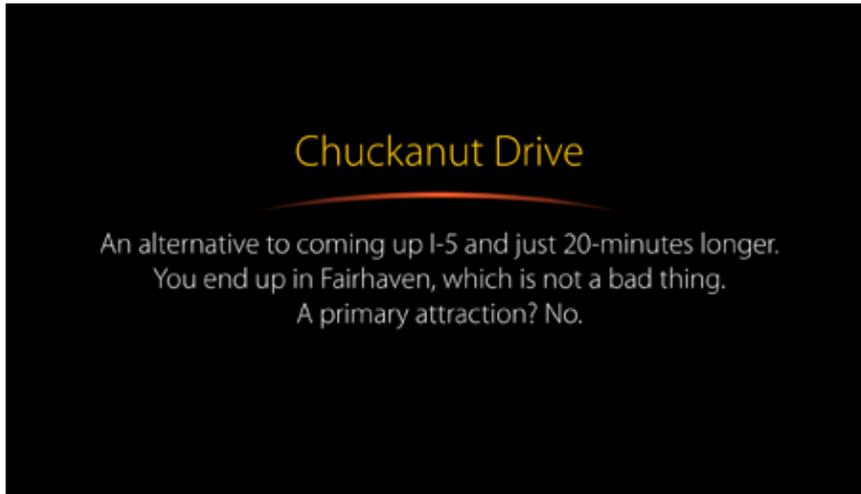


We came across Larrabee State Park, and it is very nice. Is the stage ever used for performances? (top left) If so, add a readerboard to invite people back by showing them the upcoming attractions. Even if it's only used once a year, let people know about it!

Of course parks have rules, but be sure to welcome visitors before hitting them with all the rules and cautions (top right).

Here is a wasted opportunity to cross-promote the area (bottom left). Stock these brochure holders with information for Fairhaven, Bellingham, and other areas in Whatcom County.

It's great that you have a park store and sell logo gear (bottom right). In addition to letting us know that you have the store, be sure to tell visitors where it is. We couldn't find it!



Chuckanut Drive is a lovely scenic byway, and it's a pleasant alternative route from the Skagit Valley to Bellingham, rather than I-5, although much slower. Promoting it as an alternative, scenic route is fine, but it isn't a primary attraction. Scenic views are not commonly seen from Chuckanut Drive in Whatcom County - they are more easily seen from Skagit County.

Arriving in Fairhaven, we were charmed. Fairhaven is a gem of a village. They are doing a good job of being a fun place to shop and dine in an attractive, historic setting. Keep in mind that historic downtowns aren't a draw because

of their history, but because of the things to do. The history is the setting, and people are looking for activities - the historic setting adds to the appeal, but if there weren't great shops and restaurants - if there were just empty historic buildings - visitors and residents wouldn't want to spend their time there. But Fairhaven is doing a good job providing both a great setting as well as the activities that people want.

Tony's (bottom right) is a great gathering place. We loved the availability of outdoor dining, the beautification, and the artistic flare of the community.



We thought Fairhaven would make a great place for a girls' day out (or a girls' weekend out). It is one of the best art towns we've seen, and it's definitely worth a drive from Seattle.

There are so many fun things to see, shops to check out, restaurants to try. We came back the next day, and there was a farmers market being held in the village green - we hadn't known about it beforehand. Suggest you keep a sign posted at the village green to let people know about it - not just on the day it's being held, but all the time, so people will be invited back.

If any other activities are held there, be sure to have signage to let people know about them as well.

How cool is this?

This is worth a special trip from Seattle or Vancouver.

Once again: Promote activities, not amenities.



The girls weekend out

Port Townsend. LaConner. Langley. Winslow (Bainbridge Island). Leavenworth. Snohomish. Cannon Beach. Fairhaven Village.



We saw the sign for the Steampunk Festival (top left) and the Where's Waldo Party. These are great, and they should be widely promoted. They sound like they would be worth a drive from Seattle!

We stumbled across these old stones in the grass (bottom left and right). They are fun! They've obviously been neglected over the years, and we suggest you bring them back - turn them into a diversionary activity. We were told that not all of them are accurate, and that's okay. Promote them as legends. This would give visitors another activity to keep them in town longer. The first goal is to



get visitors to stop. If you can keep visitors in town for two hours, spending doubles.

Find your hidden gems - you can promote them in your "Best Of" brochure. They aren't necessarily things people would travel an hour for, but they can be fun little gems that add to the experience.



While Fairhaven has a lot going for it, there are a few improvements that could be made.

Add more beautification. This pot (top left) is pretty, but imagine what the street would look like if there were ten pots and several benches along the sidewalk? It would invite people to continue down the street to check out all the shops. People love to spend time in beautiful places.

Beautification can be more than pots of flowers and benches. Note how

these merchants in Canmore (bottom left) put out attractive displays of their merchandise to entice customers into their shops. Bring window displays outside. But an attractive display of merchandise is very different from racks of clothes (top right) or tables filled with piles of merchandise. Avoid the garage sale look.

Suggestion #22: Add a readerboard at the Village Green (bottom right) to let people know what events are coming up. Invite people back!

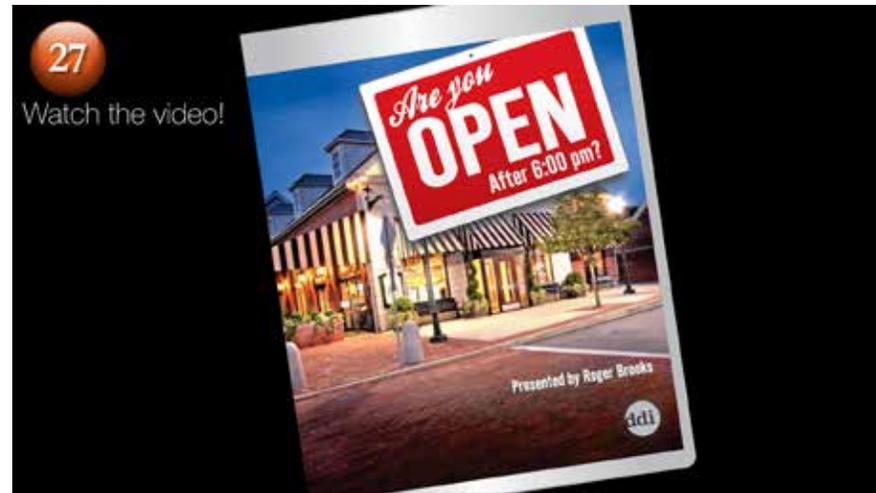


This is a perfect place for a visitor information kiosk (top left). One of our favorite kiosks is this one in Cape May, New Jersey (top right). At the top, it has text that reads, "Welcome friends, old & new, linger here a day or two." It provides lots of space for brochure distribution.

When visitors are traveling, they still want to use brochures - electronic kiosks are not nearly as helpful for visitors. There's nothing for them to take with them. Bentley University's Center for Marketing Technology performed a study of travelers' use of different types of information. They found that prior

to traveling, only 32% of travel decisions are made using brochures (#1 is the internet; #2 is recommendations from friends and family). But during travel, 81% of decisions are made using printed brochures. Make sure to have them available for visitors!

Consider painting utility boxes (bottom left), so they become decorative works of art, such as these (bottom right) in Edmonton, Alberta.



Suggestion: Move the newspaper boxes to the Village Green (top left). It's difficult to keep the area under them clean, so it would be great to move them to a different location.

This shop closes at 5:30 Monday through Saturday, and at 5:00 on Sundays (top right). The problem? Seventy percent of ALL consumer retail spending takes place after 6:00 p.m. If shops close before that, they are missing out on that spending.

You will never find a shopping mall closed before 6:00 - they are usually open until at least 9:00. When people are at work all day, when can they go out shopping? In the evenings! Your visitors are out all day hiking, boating, and enjoying recreational activities, and when they are done for the day, they want to enjoy a nice dinner and spend some leisure time shopping.

We are moving to the European standard - where we dine and shop later in the evening hours. Watch our video (bottom right), which can give you great ideas for how smaller merchants can stay open later.



Here are seven facts about downtowns:

#1 Downtowns = visitor spending. The top activity of visitors is shopping, dining and entertainment in a pedestrian-friendly, intimate setting. This is where 80% of all non-lodging tourism spending takes place. That's why Disney has built Downtown Disney (top left) outside its theme parks.

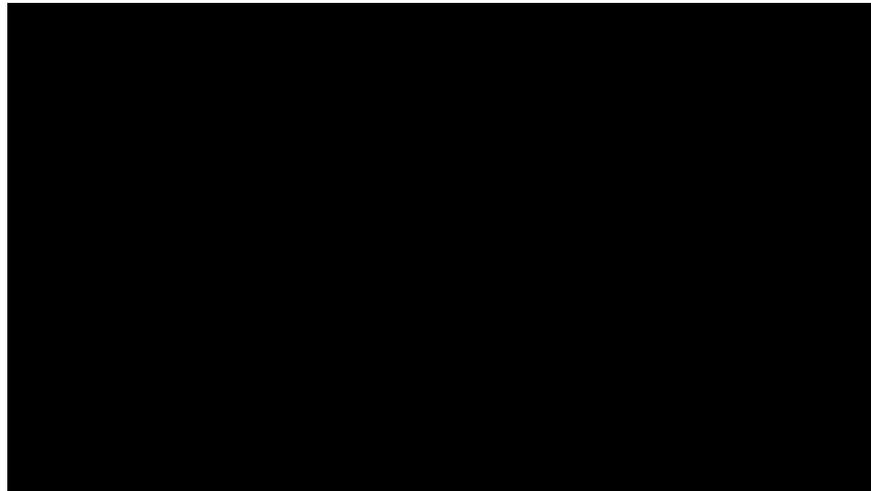
And 70% of ALL retail spending takes place after 6:00 pm. Are you open?

#2 Tourism IS economic development. Tourism is the front door to non-tourism economic development. Someone thinking of moving their business

to your downtown (top right) comes as a visitor first. Downtown organizations and tourism should be joined at the hip. Downtown is the litmus test for the health of the community.

#3 Downtowns are critical to your success. The heart and soul of any community (besides its people) is its downtown. If locals don't hang out in your downtown, neither will visitors. Help attract people downtown by bringing it to life (bottom left).

#4 Downtowns are back! People want downtowns more than ever. Even Walmart is trying to take advantage of that fact (bottom right).



Here's why downtowns are so important:

This is the age of third places. The first place is where you live (top left). The second place is where you work (top right). The third place is where you hang out (bottom left). And people are less and less likely to hang out in a mall. The last suburban mall was built 24 years ago. People want a downtown setting.

We are slowly moving to the European standard. We're eating dinner later, we're shopping later at night, and we're looking for things to do after work and

on weekends. People want to have those "third places" to gather together in their leisure hours, relaxing, dining, shopping, and spending time together.

Create gathering places with music, street artisans and vendors.



Starbucks (top left) built a whole brand on providing “third places” for their customers - becoming the place people will spend time with friends.

Downtown Fact #5 The future of downtowns is to be the place we go after work and on weekends. We want places that are open and lively after work: cafe dining (top right), shopping (bottom left).

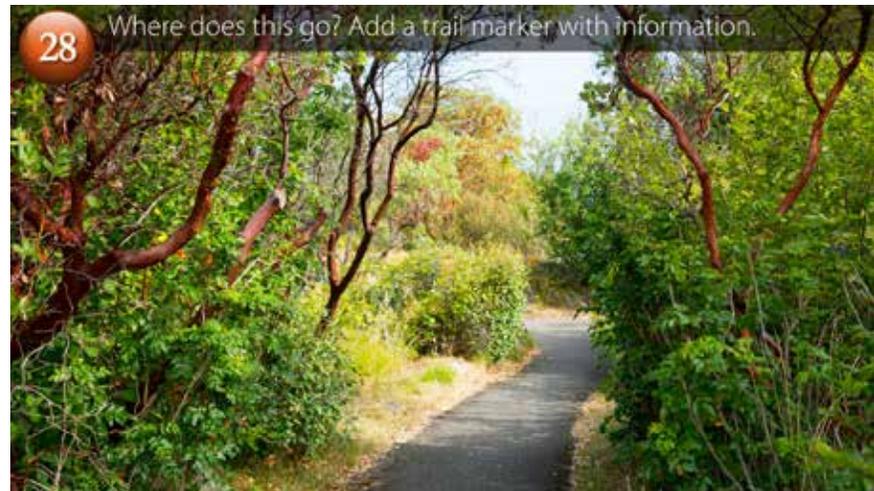
You have two downtowns that are third places: Bellingham and Fairhaven - except most of Fairhaven’s shops close before 6:00 pm.

Most cities in Europe are built around plazas (bottom right), like this piazza in Sienna, Italy. They aren’t just empty space or grassy parks - they are filled with restaurants, shopping, and entertainment. People gather in the plazas and spend time there, socializing, dining, shopping, and being together in a community atmosphere.



Washington cities in the list of best downtowns

- Bellingham	Up and coming:
- LaConner	- Friday Harbor
- Port Townsend	- Anacortes
- Fairhaven	- Ballard
- Lynden	- Edmonds
- Leavenworth	- Snohomish
- Winslow (Bainbridge Island)	- Bellevue
- Langley	
- Capitol Hill	



This piazza in Florence, Italy (top left) was filled with great entertainment, like this singer and her accompanist. The Santa Monica Third Street Promenade (top right) used to be a “dead zone,” but it’s been revitalized and is now one of the busiest downtown blocks in California. It’s filled with street entertainers, dining, and shopping.

#6 In economic development, tourism, and community development, there is NOTHING that’s more important than your downtown.

#7 The business mix rules. We looked at 2,000 cities and towns, and surveyed

400 of the most successful downtowns and downtown districts in the U.S. and Canada to discover the 20 most common ingredients for their success. One big mistake many towns make is thinking that beautifying the streetscapes and facade improvements will “fix” an ailing downtown. It’s what’s IN the buildings that makes a downtown successful. Beautification is only half the equation. Business mix is equally important.

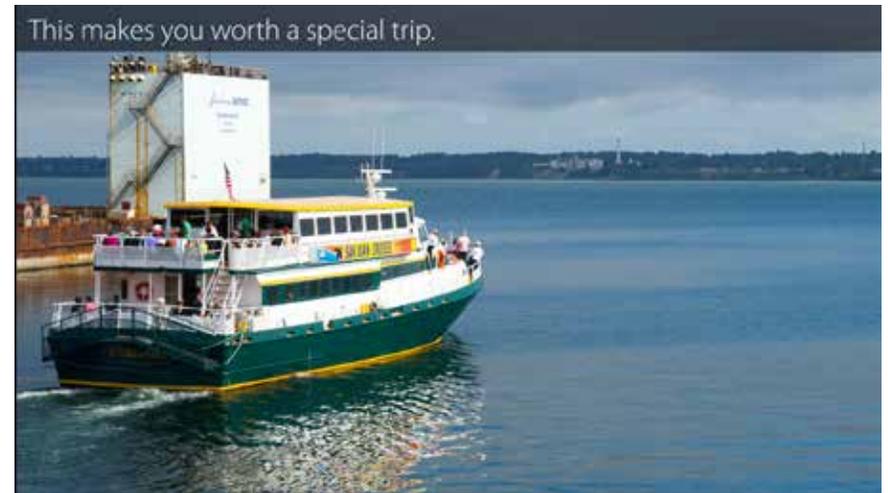
Back to Fairhaven - We found this little trail (bottom right), but without any signage we didn’t know where it went.



29 Consider a little landscape maintenance and cleanup.



30 The terminal is dark and stark. Bring it to life with color & light!



This makes you worth a special trip.

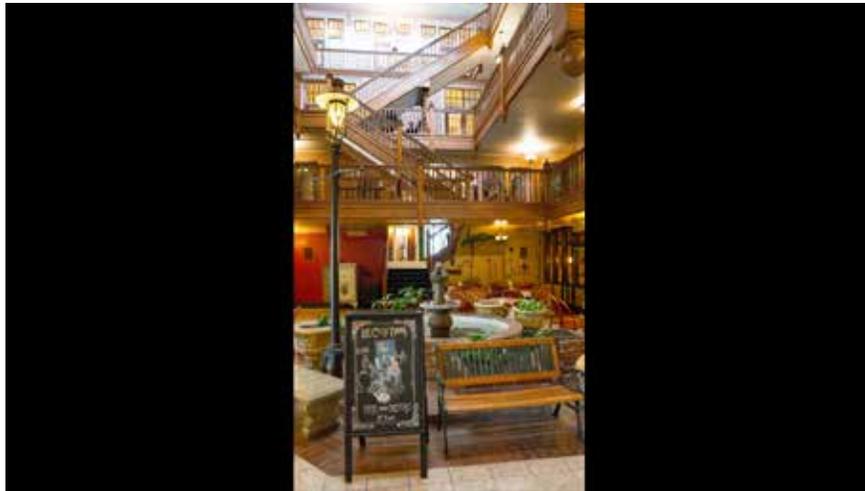
There seems to be a zone between downtown Fairhaven and the waterfront that is neglected (top left). Try a little landscape maintenance to make it more appealing.

There is a little coffee shop down by the water that is really cute, but being so removed from downtown, we weren't sure if they got enough business. Making the transition area between downtown and the water might help that.

The terminal looked very nice (top right), but inside was dark and echoey (bottom left). Consider filling it with art and activity.

Cruises like these (bottom right) are the types of things that people will drive from Seattle to experience. They're great. And after the cruise? People want to go into your shops, your galleries, your restaurants, and spend money.

These are the types of things to promote - activities - rather than just "things" like lakes, trails and waterfront. People want activities.

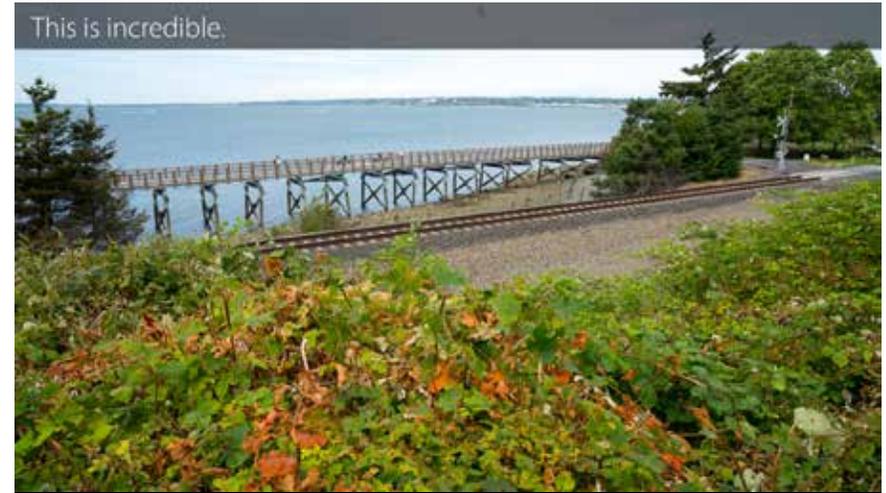


Activities make you worth a special trip.

Fairhaven has some real hidden assets, like this beautiful little abbey garden cafe (top right). People would have a hard time finding it without wayfinding. It should be promoted in your "Best Of" guide.

This building (bottom left) is also stunning, and it should be promoted.

My local friend asked me if I'd seen the boardwalk in Fairhaven. I hadn't, and had no idea there was one. It turns out that behind this pole (bottom right), there is a little sign that points you to the boardwalk.



The Very Best of Fairhaven

- Chuckanut Bay Gallery
- Gallery West
- Good Earth Pottery
- Artwood
- Village Books
- Dirty Dan Harris Steaks & Seafood
- The "Interurban Trail" (find a sexy name)
- San Juan Cruises
- (name) Sailing Adventures
- Your top four restaurants...

Fairhaven Village

One of the "Top 10" reasons to make a special trip to Whatcom County as THE destination, instead of as a pit stop.

This sign to the boardwalk (top left) needs to be much larger, and the boardwalk needs to be promoted. It is important. I understand it connects all the way to Bellingham - that's awesome! (top right)

Fairhaven has a lot of great attractions, and it could use its very own "Best Of Fairhaven" brochure. This brochure needs to promote specific businesses and attractions, and the selection of those should be based upon certain criteria:

- Must be highly regarded (80%+ positive peer reviews, regional publications)
- Must have good curb appeal
- Must be open year-round

- Must be open until at least 6:00 pm and be open six days a week
- Must be unique to your town (no chains)

We made an initial list of businesses we thought would fit the bill - but we didn't have a chance to see everything, so this list should be refined. These businesses should be invited to participate in your brochure, and they would pay a fee for their panel (perhaps \$400).

Consider changing the name of the Interurban Trail. That's a boring name with little appeal.

But Fairhaven Village is awesome, and it's worth the drive from Seattle.



We drove on to check out Ferndale. All the times I've driven on I-5, I've never thought Ferndale had a real downtown. Seeing the sign on the freeway (top left), I see that there is visitor information and historic attractions, so I take the exit.

Unfortunately, when I reach the light after the exit (top right), there are no signs directing me to Ferndale, the attractions, or visitor information. Add directional signage so that people know which way to turn!

I turned left (bottom left), but there wasn't much.

So I went back and crossed the freeway (bottom right). There were some big box stores, but I still didn't know if this was all there was to Ferndale, or if there was more to the town.

Add signage "Downtown ahead 1/2 mile."



I drove on further, and then I saw the sign (top left) for visitor information, historic attractions, and lakes. I kept on going, and finally saw the Ferndale sign (top right), promoting a new chamber of commerce member. It's unusual for a city gateway sign to be promoting an organization - it would be better to use the readerboard to welcome visitors or announce an upcoming event.

I finally arrived in downtown Ferndale (bottom left and right) and it looks great. Right away I noticed the hanging baskets, decorative streetlights, mural, and beautification.

Add some more pots, planters, and benches (bottom right). Benches should always be placed against the building facades facing towards the sidewalk, and they should be flanked with pots.



Soften the transition between the buildings and the sidewalks by adding more beautification. The merchant on the very end of this block is doing a good job, but not many merchants are making an effort. The city is doing its part with the hanging baskets, and the merchants need to help too. Make beautification a top priority for downtown. Seventy percent of first time sales at retail shops, wineries, restaurants and golf courses can come from curb appeal. Beautification is an investment with tremendous returns.

Take a look at this autumn display at a shop in Jonesborough, TN (bottom left).

Doesn't it make you want to go in?

This gift shop along the Blue Ridge Parkway (bottom right) is decorated for the holidays with silk flowers. It doesn't have to be warm weather for beautification to be effective.



Mahone Bay, Nova Scotia



Mahone Bay, Nova Scotia



Neenah, Wisconsin



One of our favorite towns is Mahone Bay, Nova Scotia (top left and right). A major reason it is a favorite is that it is so attractive - brightly painted buildings, flowers and landscaping everywhere, beautiful decorative signage, and a large variety of specialty shops. The merchants do their best to keep the sidewalks clean and their storefronts inviting and beautiful. People like to spend time in beautiful places.

This restaurant in Mahone Bay, Nova Scotia (top right) has window boxes and planters full of flowers, and they even make their menu board decorative to

entice customers inside.

Neenah, Wisconsin did a downtown makeover (before: bottom left, and after: bottom right). Retail sales in the block with the beautification increased by one-third of the non-beautified street.

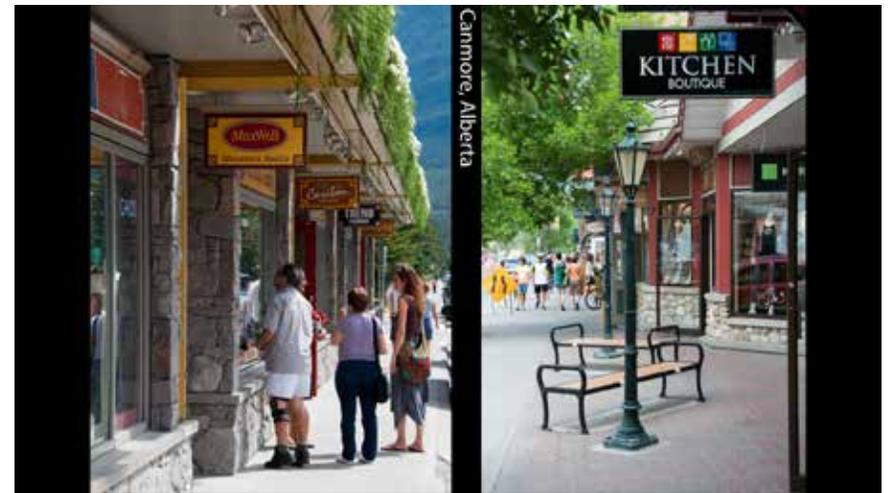


Curb appeal makes restaurants and shops inviting. Have you ever said, "That looks like a good place to eat"? We like to eat at places that have good curb appeal.

This restaurant (top left) would look much more inviting with outdoor cafe tables, chairs, and umbrellas, as well as some pots. If Ferndale doesn't allow outdoor dining, then change the ordinance. Ordinances like that can kill a downtown.

Likewise, this restaurant (top right) needs more beautification to make it more inviting.

The retail signage for all these shops (bottom left) can only be read by someone standing across the street. That's not very helpful. Blade signs (perpendicular signs) should be a top priority.



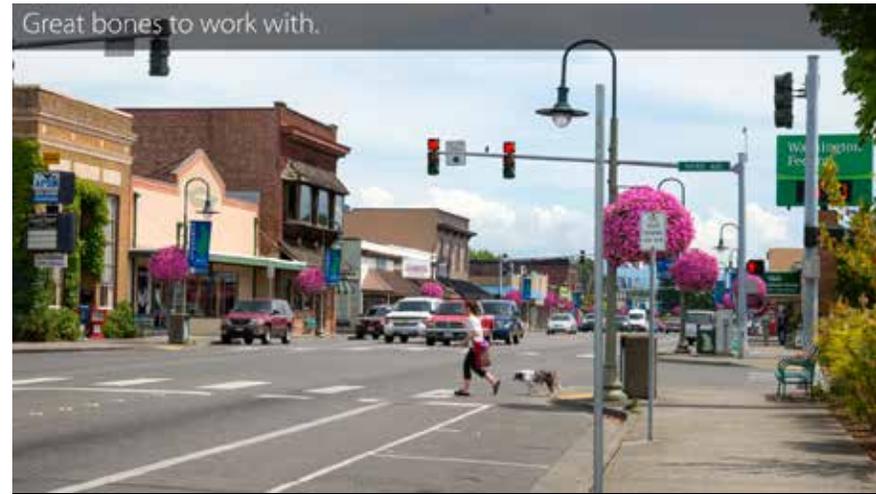
Blade signs make it easy for potential customers to see what shops you have and where they are. When people travel down a road, either walking or driving, they are looking directly in front. Blade signs are easy to read. Signs placed flat on the building are hidden from view, unless the driver turns his head from side to side to try to read them as he's driving.

Nearly all successful downtowns have blade signs.

These signs in Leavenworth, WA (top left) are excellent examples of effective

blade signs. Nantucket, Massachusetts (top right) also uses very good blade signs.

Other examples include Carmel, CA (bottom left) and Canmore, Alberta (bottom right). Blade signs should be a consistent height and size, they should be decorative, and they should promote the primary lure before the name of the business.



Downtown retail signs should follow these guidelines:

- Lettering should be one inch tall for every twelve feet of viewing distance.
- Script lettering should always be avoided.
- The signage should be decorative to enhance the ambiance of the city. Real signs, no billboards or painted plywood signs.
- Retailers and attractions should promote the primary lure first, then the business name.
- Blade signs should be a consistent height and size.

- Keep verbiage to four words - no more than six words.

Ferndale is a very attractive town with a lot of potential to be even better.

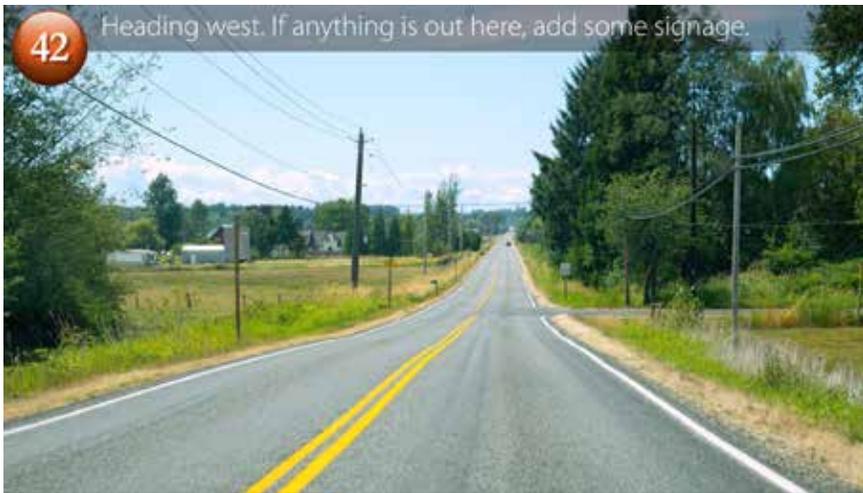
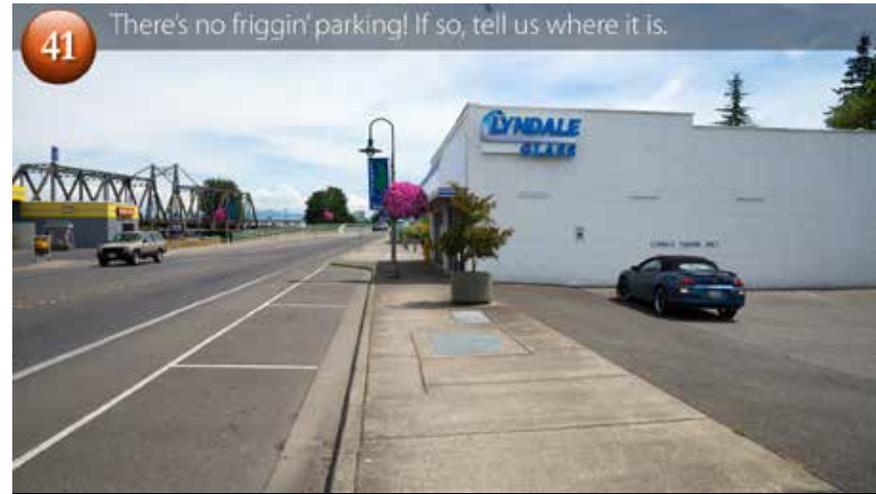
We saw the great plaza (bottom left) with a beautiful fountain and a lot of appeal. There were restrooms there, which is awesome (bottom right).

Suggestion: Add some visitor information at the restrooms.



Provide information visitors can take with them. Even something as simple as this weather-proof brochure holder in North Platte, Nebraska, (top right and bottom left). It gives visitors an opportunity to take a brochure, and it was inexpensive to construct - about \$300. These could be mounted on several buildings throughout town or throughout the county. The lid lifts, and it can hold a couple large brochures and a smaller one.

I saw this great poster (bottom right). Perfect!



We came across this great plaza area next to the river, but we never saw anyone using it (top left).

I wanted to take a closer look, so I tried to find parking. There isn't a parking lot for the park, so I parked in this store lot (top right), planning to just be there for a few minutes. Someone came out of the store and asked me not to park there, so I moved to another store's lot.

The town has this great amenity, but hasn't provided any place for people to

park to use the amenity! If there is parking, put up a sign directing people to its location. If there isn't any, explore the possibility of creating some.

We drove out further west of Ferndale, but there were no signs for anything, so we turned around and came back (bottom left). We saw the nice gateway sign and entrance into town from the west - good job! It's very nice.

We saw the saloons and western-feel of the town, and it was fun. Ferndale could focus its brand on western-style pioneer spirit - it would fit!



Hands down: Ferndale's Old Settlers Picnic wins the marketing award!



43 So far, so good! And miles! This should be on other signs!



44 Have someone clean up this sign before it disappears.

Ferndale's Old Settlers Picnic has done a great job marketing (top left). We saw plenty of promotion for the picnic as well as the fair.

We wanted to head out to Birch Bay, so we went back to I-5 to find our way. There's good signage from the freeway (top right), and we found there was good wayfinding along the route (bottom left). Telling the number of miles to a destination is very helpful - add miles to other signs as well.

This sign (bottom right) is beginning to get covered with overgrowth - clear it out so the sign stays readable.



Arrived at the state park at Birch Bay, saw the signs with all the rules (top left). Suggest adding a “Welcome” message first, plus adding visitor information. Of course it’s important to post the rules, but don’t forget about welcoming your visitors and giving them more information about the area to cross-promote. The benefit of tourism doesn’t come from visitors at the parks - it comes from those visitors spending money at your restaurants, shops, lodging, and entertainment facilities. So be sure to promote them through good visitor information.

We saw the signs for the “Discovery Pass” (top right). There was never an explanation telling what it was or where to buy them - just that they are required. What is it? Give more information so that visitors know what they need to do to comply.

Birch Bay is a great beach town (bottom left). There was a nice visitor information center (bottom right) in a good setting.



Birch Bay has become a fun town, with some quaint hidden gems and some quirky, fun things to do. We thought it was awesome. It's improved since the last time I visited long ago, and I was very happy to see it.

The "signature" retail shop was packed (top left) - yellow pulls the eye faster than any other color. That goes for brochures, advertising, and buildings!

The lodging looked very nice, and they did a good job with beautification.

This restaurant (top right), with its outdoor dining, looks wonderful.

There were a lot of plastic banners being used by retailers - try to put a limit on plastic banner use. They should only be used for short periods of time for special occasions.

Be sure to promote the activities. People come to experience special activities - not just the beach. So promote "fat tire biking on the beach." Promote the "motor-trike riding on the beach." There are so many things people want to do while there - if you capture their imaginations by helping them visualize what they will enjoy doing, they are more likely to want to visit.



The waterslide (top right) looks fantastic, and a lot of people will come just for that. This should be promoted.

What a great place to visit - Birch Bay has cottages, hotels, condos - lots of excellent lodging facilities. It makes it easy for all types of people to find the right place to stay.

The fastest growing trend in travel is multi-generational travel. Baby boomers want to travel with their kids and grandkids. 34,000,000 Americans and

Canadians took at least three multi-generational travel trips in the last year.

Forbes reports that multi-generational family travel tops the list of travel trends. Rounding out the list are river cruising, active or adventure trips, safaris, distant family connections, and celebration travel. Travel agencies are now tailoring tourism to the needs of families traveling with younger and older relatives.



Why should Whatcom County focus on multi-generational travel? No traveling "unit" spends more and stays longer than multi-generational travelers. And no group spreads the word faster and further via social media and word of mouth.

Birch Bay, with its wealth of fun activities and lodging options, is a perfect destination for multi-generational travel.

We started heading toward Lummi Island, and we saw the Silver Reef Casino! (bottom left and right) I had no idea this was out here. Add signage to make sure people are aware of it and can find it.

The casino is about four miles from I-5. For someone who's never driven there before, four miles seems like twenty. So add "reminder" signs along the way. Let people know the distance so they don't give up and think they've missed it. "Silver Reef Casino - Great Steaks! - Only two miles left to go!"

This looks terrific!



49 Perhaps your Birch Bay "provisioning headquarters."



Can you read this?



50 Yikes! Never more than 8 to 14 words on a sign. This has 40.



Birch Bay Square looks very nice. There are a lot of vacancies, and I hope it will end up doing well. I was told that the summer visitor spending was down because of the Canadian exchange rate. With the volatility of the exchange rate, it's best to not rely on Canadian traffic for survival. Focus on appealing to more of the local and Puget Sound markets.

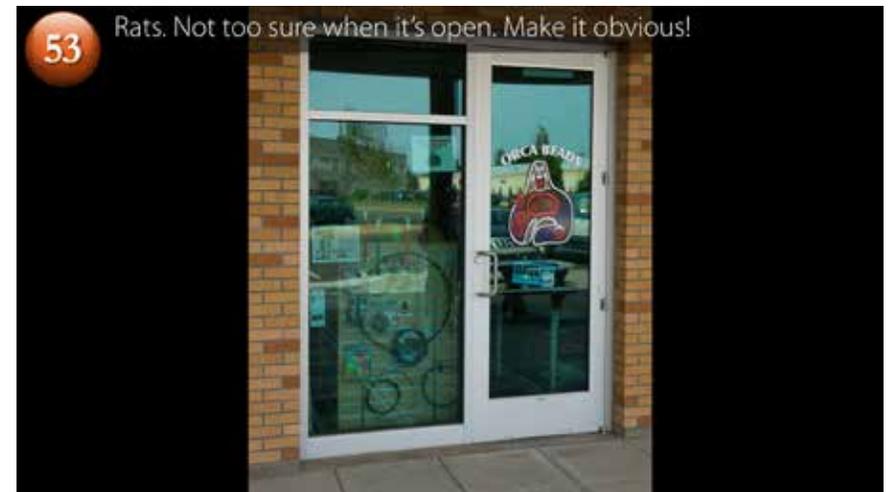
This market is great (top right). Perhaps find your focus as the provisioning headquarters for the Birch Bay visitors?

Can you read this billboard? (bottom left) It's almost impossible to read even the top.

This billboard has 40 words (bottom right). There is no way anyone can read that many words when they are driving 70 mph on the freeway. We have four seconds to read a sign. When people can't read it, they will just ignore it. Billboards cannot be designed as print ads - they just don't work.

51 Billboard rules:

- Never use outlined text
- No more than 14 words
- 1 simple graphic
- The simpler the better
- Billboards should NEVER look like print ads
- Yellow on dark pulls the eye
- You have four seconds



Outlined text doesn't work well on signage (top right) because it makes it more difficult to read. In this case, the colors are too close in hue to the brick background, and the sign just doesn't stand out.

This sign has more than 30 words (bottom left), so it would be impossible to read while driving.

I was looking forward to shopping here (bottom right), but it wasn't open, even though this was during business hours. There wasn't a sign to tell me when it would be open, so I didn't know when to come back, or if it was closed permanently.



We saw the sign for the Lummi Nation, next right turn (top left). We didn't know if there was anything there for visitors. Are there activities? Shopping? Dining? Any reason to go there?

Then we also saw the Lummi Island sign (top right). We weren't sure how far to the ferry terminal, or how often the ferries ran. So we decided not to go. With so many unknowns, it wasn't worth taking the chance.

If Lummi Island businesses would like visitors to the island, promote the activities and provide enough information for visitors to make an informed decision.

Driving along I-5, heading toward Lynden, the exit was clearly marked, easy to follow (bottom left). So we continued driving along the Guide Meridian, for miles and miles of traffic circles (bottom right). They sure make the drive longer, and it feels like forever. We were starting to wonder if we'd gone too far or taken the wrong road.



The first “reminder” sign we saw was when we were only three miles from Lynden (top left). Since Lynden is such a long drive, place “reminder” signs along the routes, like “Lynden - 15 miles” or “Lynden - 10 miles.”

The shop is gorgeous, and we saw that in addition to the shop and cafe, there is a distillery. What a gem! This is a must-visit. Just look at the decor to entice you inside (bottom right). Excellent.

We spotted Bellewood Acres, and we weren’t sure what it was (bottom left). It looked very nice, so we wanted to check it out. It was difficult to read everything on the sign as we were driving past, but we did see the beautiful landscaping and the cafe sign.

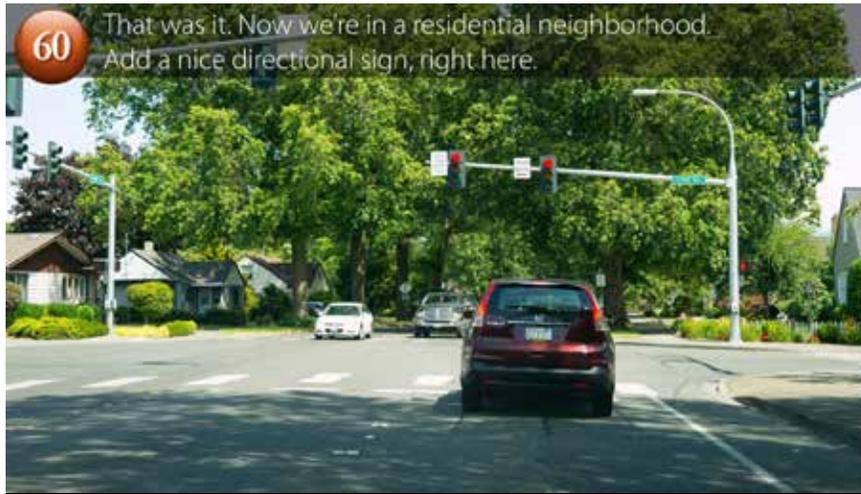


Since the Bellewood Acres sign is difficult to read going so quickly along the highway, we suggest some changes (top left). Instead of so much "busyness" - with essentially four signs, put the messaging all on one sign. Don't use plastic banners. All you have to say on the sign is: Home accents and gifts - Farm to table care - Distillery & local wines - Bellewood Acres. Always promote what you're selling before the name of the store.

We also suggest you create a "Best of Lynden" brochure, and Bellewood Acres should be included.

We got together with some friends who drove up from Lynnwood, and they commented, "Did you see that really creepy place on the way here?" They were talking about this place (top right). It might be a great place, but its appearance made it look creepy to our friends. We tend to "judge the book by its cover" so it's important to create a good first impression.

We finally reached Lynden's gateway sign (bottom left), and it looks beautiful. Since the town of Lynden is actually a ways further, we suggest you top the sign with directional signage saying "Lynden's Dutch Village - 2 miles."

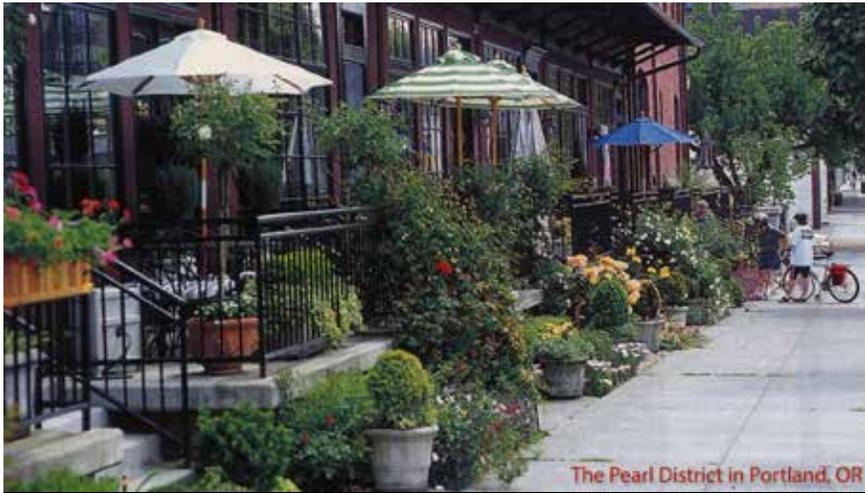


After reaching Lynden's gateway sign, we drove through an unimpressive commercial district, and then reached a residential neighborhood (top left). This gives the impression that that's all there is to Lynden. If we didn't know better, we would have turned around and left, thinking Lynden sure isn't much. That's why it's so important to have a good wayfinding system. Include an attractive sign that tells people "Lynden's Dutch Village ahead 1/2 mile."

The city of Woodlands, Texas, has these beautiful gateway signs on the borders of its downtown (top right). They don't mark the city limits - instead they

create a sense of arrival at the downtown core. Use gateway signs to create that sense of arrival - not at the city limits, but at the destination you're trying to get people to visit. This sign is far too small to achieve that sense of arrival (bottom left).

Suggestion: Give downtown its own unique name. Just as Market Street (top right) is Woodland's downtown.



“Business District” or “Historic Downtown” or “Historic Business Center” don’t attract people nearly as much as a special name for a downtown. Those words are designations, but not destinations. Consider giving the downtown core of Lynden a special name. Think about The Pearl District in Portland (top left).

Many towns and cities do this (top right). Doesn’t “Village Square” or “Dutch Village” sound more like a fun place to spend your time than “business center” or “downtown?”

We suggest each city give their downtown a special, unique name. It can have a big impact.

When we reached downtown, all I could say was “Wow!” It is stunning. The beautification (bottom left) is gorgeous, and the creativity of painting these murals on the blank wall (bottom right) is inspiring. What a great job.



Fantastic. Really great.



Easily one of the most beautiful downtowns in the Northwest.



This is the nicest "sandwich board" I have EVER seen.



63 Add some 24/7 visitor information: Public restrooms?

I'm going to show this photo all over the country as an example of what to do right in a downtown (top left). The bench flanked by a pair of beautiful pots is excellent, and the sign - "Take your time, look around. Parking's free." That's great. So few towns understand the value of making sure shoppers have enough time to spend as much money as they want without having to worry about tight parking constraints.

Lynden is absolutely stunning - it's one of the prettiest towns I've seen. Fantastic.

The Visitor Information Center is very attractive (bottom right). It could use some outdoor brochure holders to provide 24/7 visitor information. You'd want to put "The Best of Lynden" brochure in those holders. Are there public restrooms?



Having my local friend guide me around allowed me to see some “hidden gems.” Be sure to include hidden gems in your promotional materials - things locals would know about and are fun to explore, but may not be a strong enough draw to be the primary reason to visit. I got to see this little mall (top left), which is just great.

With fun little photo opportunities like this (top right), consider adding a little sign that says #Lynden, or #DutchLynden - whatever is appropriate. Have another little sign that says “Free WiFi” encouraging visitors to take their photos there and post them to Facebook right there. That’s a great way to promote

Lynden using social media - it’s great word-of-mouth promotion.

This is a great little mall. You can even visit Trixie, the monkey (bottom left). If people go into the shop to see Trixie, perhaps they’ll buy something as well.

For outdoor dining, always put the tables and chairs against the building, not right next to traffic (bottom right). How many people would feel comfortable having a car pull into a parking space so close to you that it might bump your leg? It also makes it easier for serving tables if they are right next to the building, and there is still room for passersby on the sidewalk.



66 Develop sidewalk cafe dining or flank the benches with pots.



The art center was fantastic (top left). The architecture, and everything about it was first rate.

We encourage all your restaurants to offer outdoor dining. This Greek restaurant (top right) has benches outside, and we suggest using this space for tables and chairs and umbrellas. Also, restaurants should always have outdoor beautification - some pots or planters. And anytime you have benches outside, they should always be flanked with pots.

If any of the towns don't allow outdoor dining, change the ordinances.

Successful downtowns have outdoor dining and sidewalk cafes. They bring a downtown to life! Outdoor dining can attract more people to your downtown.

In Newport on the Levee in Kentucky, there are many different options for outdoor dining (bottom left). This restaurant in Salem, Massachusetts (bottom right) uses pots of silk flowers for beautification and to set up an attractive barrier between the diners and the pedestrian traffic, creating a greater feeling of intimacy.



When sidewalks are too narrow to allow for ample outdoor dining, some towns all the restaurants to reroute pedestrians around the seating as they do in Wolfville, NS (top right and left). Part of its charm is the “organic” ambiance it creates. The merchants have built sidewalks to wrap around their dining spaces, and then made them decorative.

Canmore, AB (bottom left) does many things right. There is an abundance of outdoor dining, and this restaurant, with its little fence for intimacy and its geraniums, does a good job of being welcoming.

Another restaurant in Canmore, AB (bottom right). There’s not a lot of space, but they make the most of it. This outdoor dining looks lovely.



The 7 • 8 • 7 rule

70% of first time sales can come from curb appeal
 80% of all spending is by women
 70% of retail spending takes place after 6:00 pm



Even this little spot in Canmore (top left) only has room for two small tables, but they use it! When people are sitting here eating ice cream, it makes other people want to have some too.

Another example from Canmore (top right).

We've talked about how 70% of first time sales can come from curb appeal, and we've talked about the fact that 70% of retail spending takes place after 6:00 p.m. Another important statistic is that 80% of ALL retail spending is made

by women. Women like to spend time in attractive places that make them feel safe. Beautification helps with both.

Note the photo bottom right. These men are relaxing while their partners are shopping. Provide plenty of benches!



This is downtown Lynden (top left). And so is this (top right). Note all the men sitting on the benches. They are so important.

Many of the merchants are doing a fantastic job with beautification, while some need to step up their game. Consider adding benches and pots here (bottom left).

Benches should always be against the building facade, facing the street.

Another great way to add beautification is to use outdoor displays of merchandise, like this furniture store in Canmore (bottom right).



68 Museum gift shop or Toys R Us? Tone it back a bit. Perhaps "Educational toys & gifts"

We saw this great sign and display in Sisters, Oregon (top left). It's a great little piece of beautification. And outdoor cafes are a part of overall beautification - they look great and entice people to dine and spend time in the downtown.

We saw the great little museum (top right). It has very good curb appeal, and the carriage is fun to see outside. We didn't get a chance to go in, but we hope to next time we're in Lynden. Here are some general notes for museums:

- The average museum visit lasts between 20 and 40 minutes.
- If you can captivate the visitor for two hours, spending will increase.

- Museums must tell stories, not just display artifacts with facts, dates, and figures.
- Most visitors don't really care who donated various items - it doesn't mean anything to them. Visitors would rather hear the stories about the people who used the items on display. How did they live? What interesting things happened to them? Bring the displays to life by making an emotional connection with your visitors. You do that with the stories.

Avoid these words: artifacts, collections, displays, donated by ...



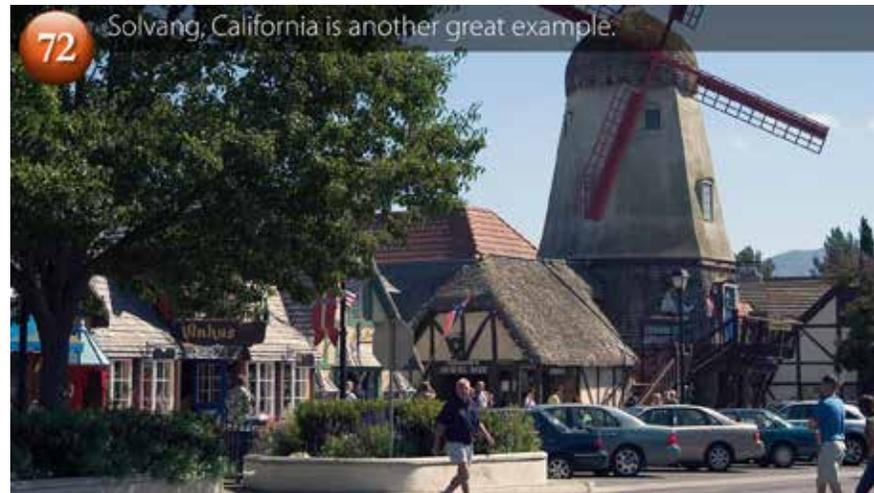
69 Add "coming soon" signage. Invite us back! Tell us when!



70 Recruit and promote additional Dutch shops



71 Consider visiting Pella, Iowa



72 Solvang, California is another great example.

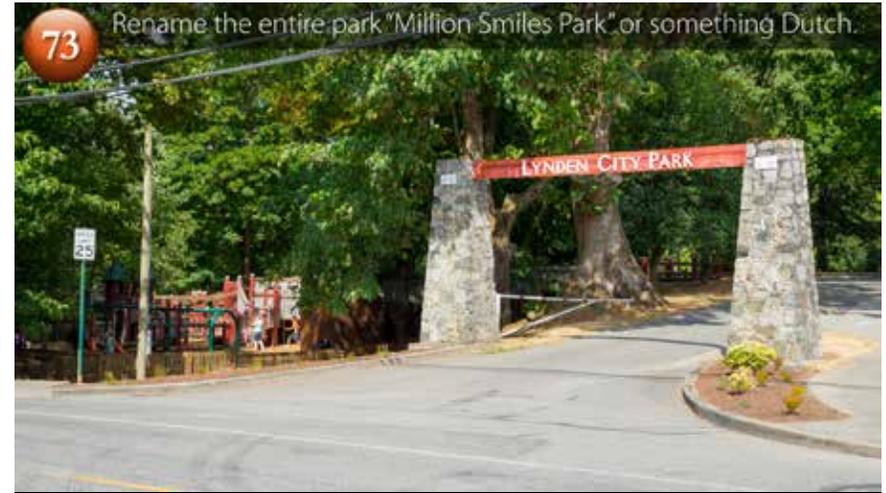
We saw this building under construction (top left), but there were no signs telling us what it would be. Consider adding signage that says "Coming Soon!" and letting people know what it will be. That will build anticipation and be an invitation to come back.

We saw the Dutch Treat Restaurant (top right), which we've heard is a favorite of local farmers.

Consider recruiting additional Dutch businesses, shops, restaurants. Anything

with a Dutch theme. Also consider enhancing some building facades downtown to make the Dutch theme more pervasive.

Consider visiting Pella, Iowa (bottom left), a Dutch-themed town. People will drive 3 hours just to visit the famed Jaarsma Bakery in Pella. Another themed town that would be great to visit is Solvang, California (bottom right).



We saw the golf course, and it looks beautiful (top left). We could see there is a restaurant there, but there's no signage to let people know if it is open for public play, if there are club and cart rentals, or if there is a pro shop. Suggest adding that information to the signage.

We saw the Lynden City Park, and it looks great (top right). My friend said that they call it "Million Smiles Park." Consider actually renaming the park "Million Smiles," or something with a little more flair and appeal than just City Park.

We drove up to the Lynden border crossing and saw that there is a lot of construction going on (bottom left and right). There were no signs telling what the construction was about, though. It would be great if they would add signage to let travelers know - are they expanding the crossing? Are new businesses going in? What's going on?



Lynden is a fabulous town. The setting among all the farmland (top left) makes it extra special - we love the agricultural atmosphere. Even scenes like this (bottom left) and this (bottom right) are fun for visitors to see.

Suggestion: Work on more farm-to-table restaurants and shops. With the setting Lynden has, it's a natural fit, and it can tie in with the Dutch theme perfectly.

Like Fairhaven, Lynden is worth a special trip from Seattle. These two

communities are Whatcom Counties "crown jewels." Together they make Whatcom County an overnight destination, and we haven't even talked about Bellingham yet. The importance of overnight visitors? They spend four times more than day visitors.

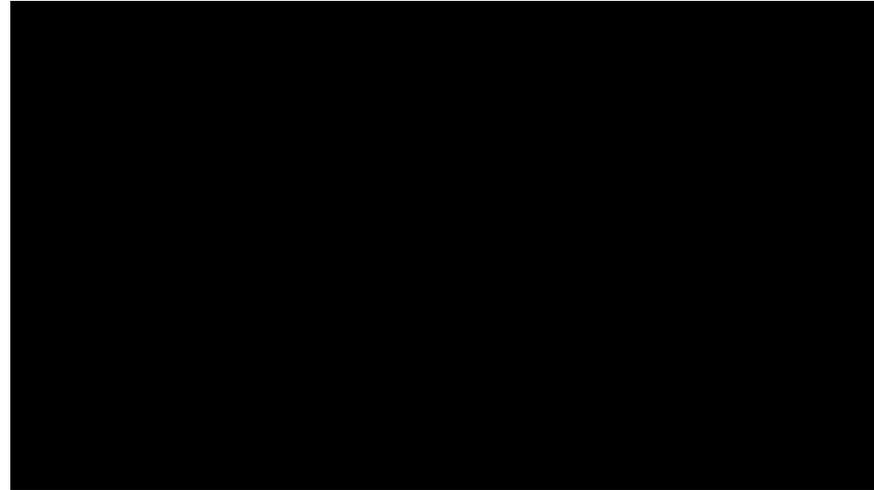
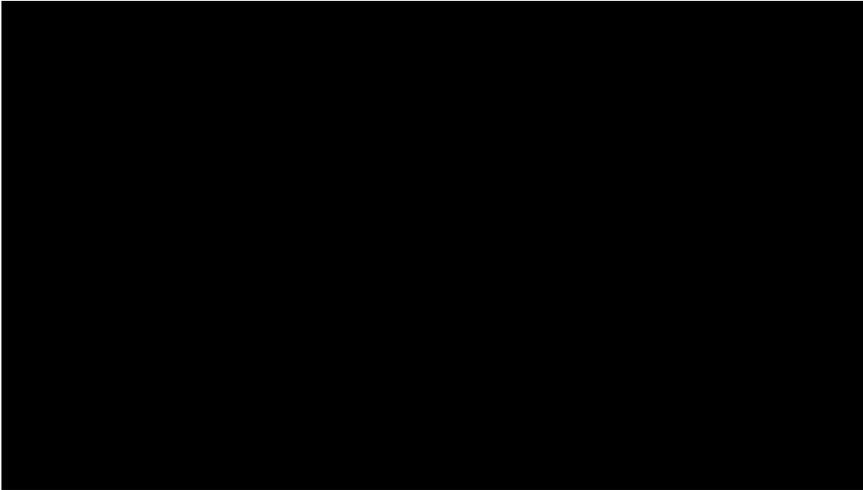
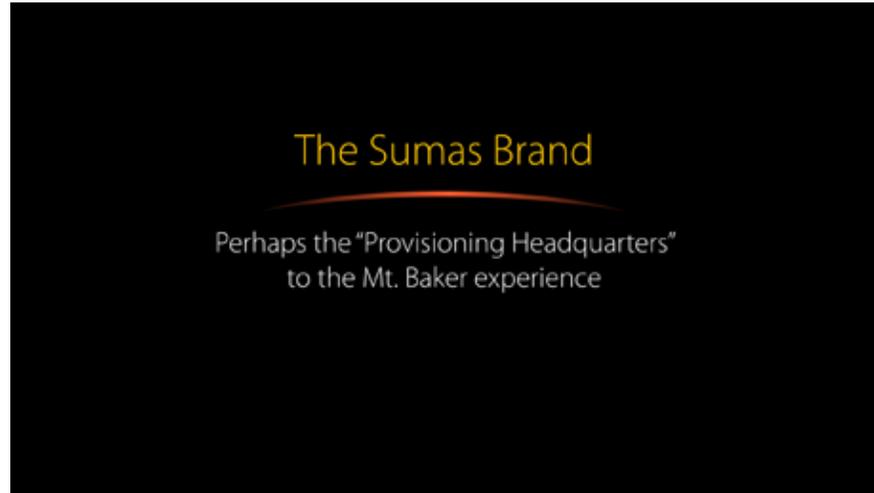


Branding comes down to what you want to be known for. Whatcom County has a great diversity of attractions and activities, and it would be great if it could be promoted as “pick your season/pick your passion.” Then, if people are interested in art, they can go to Fairhaven and the arts in other parts of Bellingham. The experience in Lynden will be different from that in Birch Bay. Visitors could focus on the activities they want, and then go to the towns that offer those activities.

We drove on to Sumas, and it’s a beautiful area. Nice gateway sign (top right), and very attractive pole banners (top left). I found many of the same shops and

restaurants I found in other towns, so there wasn’t a lot to set Sumas apart and give visitors a reason to head all the way there. However, there is the border crossing, and if people are headed to Abbotsford, they would likely want to go through Sumas.

We saw the gold miner (bottom left), and thought it would be a good spot for people to take snapshots and post to Facebook. Consider adding some interpretive signage and putting the statue a bit lower for photos. We also saw the old customs house (bottom right), but it doesn’t appear to be open.



Sumas is a nice town, and I saw Bromley's Market (top left), and I was trying to think of a focus Sumas could use to attract visitors. Perhaps the "Provisioning Headquarters" for travelers on their way to Mt. Baker.

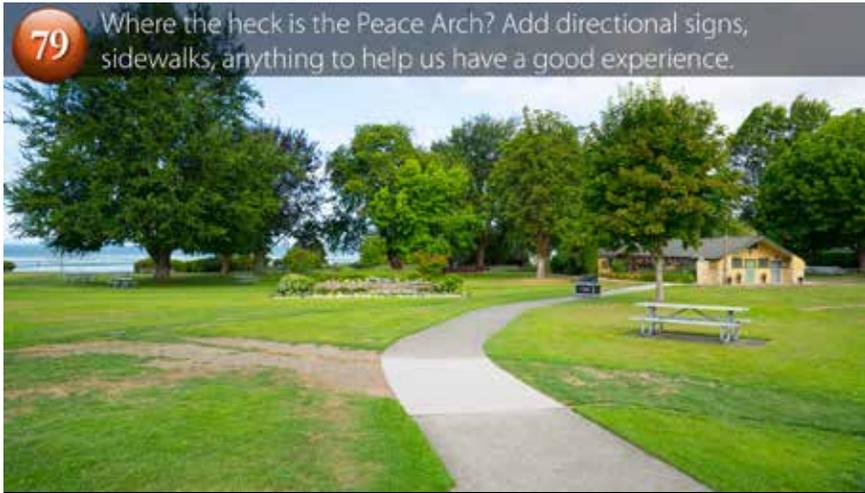


We continued our tour on to Blaine (top left). The last city before the border. Heading north, you take this exit (top right), and the exit says this is the way to Peace Arch Park. Going around this roundabout, there are no signs to the Park, except for a little, tiny one, easily missed.

This exit is the introduction to Blaine, and what you see are closed businesses (bottom left).

When you turn in to Peace Arch Park, the first thing you see is the parking fee - \$10! That rate is so high, it's amazing anyone would go to this park.

Make it easier to find the park with better wayfinding signage, and beautify the roundabout - it's visitors' very first impression of Blaine, and you want to make a good one.



79 Where the heck is the Peace Arch? Add directional signs, sidewalks, anything to help us have a good experience.



80 How about some helpful information? Where is it? The history?



81 First impression: Dated. Add color, update the facade, baskets...



82 Fingers crossed! Start with Subway: make it shine! It's drab.

After parking, we looked around for the Peace Arch. Where is it? Add wayfinding signage to let people know where it is. We saw people pull into the parking lot, look around, and leave.

We saw the visitor information kiosk (top right), but it didn't have any helpful information about the park. The park brochure doesn't tell you how to find the Peace Arch or the sculptures, and really isn't very helpful. The brochure should include a map of the park so visitors can find their way around. Also, this visitor information kiosk should also have brochures and info about Whatcom County. It's a wasted opportunity. The park is in a beautiful setting, but it

doesn't fulfill expectations. It needs wayfinding, more information, and less expensive parking.

On into Blaine!

The diner (bottom left) looks very dated. It could use updated landscaping and new paint colors. Brown, beige, and gray don't really pull customers in.

We went back out to the entrance and the roundabout to start over. Unfortunately, the Subway looks pretty drab too (bottom right). It could use fresh paint and refreshed landscaping.



Gorgeous gateway sign. So far, so good.



Beautiful pole banners!



83 It was hard to figure out where to get information. Add signage.



Blaine’s gateway is very nice (top left). I wasn’t sure if visitor information and restrooms were toward downtown or toward the harbor. The easier you make it for visitors, the more likely they are to spend time and money in your town.

I headed to the right toward the harbor and saw the very nice pole banners (top right). Found the Plover (bottom left), but there wasn’t enough information to help visitors on the sign. A couple had stopped, and I overheard them discussing the ferry. They thought it was the right ferry to Semiahmoo, but weren’t sure how often it ran, how long it took, or if they could just walk

there instead. Add a little more information to the sign: distance, how often it runs, cost.

Make it easy for visitors to find where they need to go - there wasn’t enough directional signage in the parking lot to guide people to the ferry.

We saw a sign for Blaine Pier, but we never found the pier.

There's the Peace Arch!



84 Is this ever used? Add a readerboard with "Upcoming Shows"

Here's the public parking. Not too sure why since there's nothing to do.



85 Remove all chain link fences in downtown areas.

We saw Marine Park, which is pretty and has some fun displays (top left). And from here I could see the Peace Arch!

If this stage is ever used (top right), add a readerboard to let people know about upcoming performances. Invite us back!

The public parking (bottom left) is in a location with nothing around it to do.

The Blaine harbor area is in a beautiful setting, and it has a nice marina, but there are dozens of marinas in the county and in Washington State. There

weren't any activities we could find, other than a short walk. The Plover does give you a ferry ride to Semiahmoo, but if you're not staying there, you won't find much to do.

Next we drove into downtown Blaine. Suggestion: Don't allow chain-link fencing in your downtown. It makes it look like a prison.



Across the street we saw some nice buildings and pretty streetscapes, with great street trees and hanging baskets (top left). But so many of the buildings are vacant.

There is the Dairy (top right), which is great, but we can also find them in Bellingham, Lynden, and Sumas, so it's not unique to Blaine. Some merchants are really working hard to be attractive (bottom left), and their efforts are to be applauded.

But there are also sights like this (bottom right), with old storage cars and boarded up buildings, and it gives a poor impression.

Blaine, with its location on the border and on the coast, has so much potential to be a great town, and a favorite of visitors. It needs work to get there, though.



When we worked in Blaine a number of years ago, we wanted them to open up the waterfront and build a plaza for great activities, that would function as a gathering space for locals and visitors. Now the plazas are there (top left and bottom left), but they aren't used for anything.

There should be restaurants adjacent to them with outdoor cafe dining. The plazas need programming - activities held in the plazas to give people a reason to spend time there. They need beautification, outdoor furniture (tables, chairs, comfortable benches), and a focal point, such as a fountain.

Street entertainers, events, exhibits will really enliven them. Some plazas have large chess sets for the public to use, bocci games, and we've even seen places with pianos available for the public to play (downtown Denver). Plazas need to have plenty of food available - from restaurants or food trucks or kiosks.

There needs to be programming of events, activities, and exhibits 250 days a year.

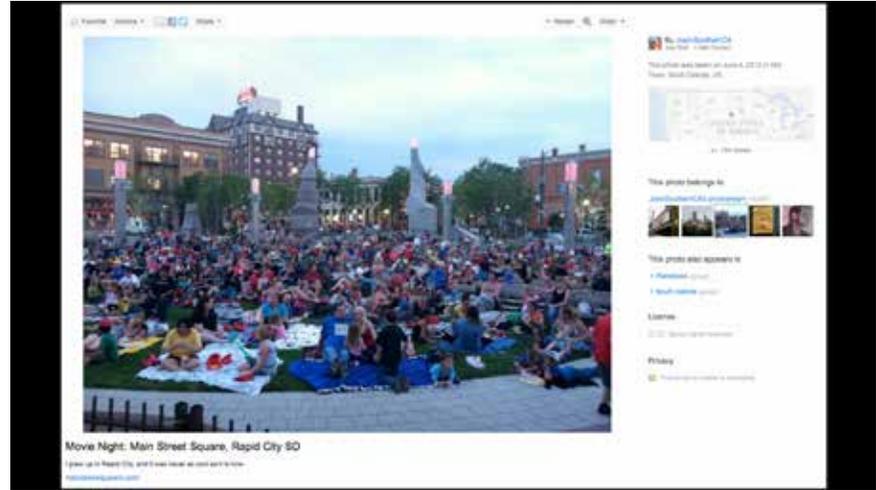


A terrific case history about a very successful public plaza is Rapid City, SD. They had attractions surrounding the city, but their downtown was dead. We recommended that they turn this parking lot (top left) into a programmed plaza (top right).

This space includes a stage, lawn area for seating or multi-purpose events, an interactive fountain, and ice skating throughout the winter. The plaza has several restaurants and shops bordering it.

The plaza is programmed year-round, so there is always something going on, and it has turned Rapid City into as big a tourism draw as Mt. Rushmore. Remember that plazas MUST be programmed, and they should always be commerce-driven, meaning they should be a place for vendors, performers, art shows, concerts, restaurants, food trucks, exhibitions, etc.

This photo shows downtown Rapid City at 10:00 a.m. on a Sunday (bottom left). The town was hosting a classic car show, and the town was packed.



Main Street Square cost \$8 million, but they felt it could have been built for \$5 million. Funding sources included philanthropy and city funds. They hold many varied types of events (top left). They plan to convert the lawn area to a high-quality artificial grass for practical reasons. The fountains at night are gorgeous (bottom left).

Rapid City's Main Street Square earns more than \$120,000 each season just renting ice skates (top right). It's now a year round gathering area for locals and visitors.

During the summer months, the city hosts "Monday Night Movies on the Square," which draws more than 3,000 people into downtown Rapid City each Monday (bottom right).

An informal survey of 14 businesses say "Best thing Rapid City has ever done."

- There are no retail vacancies.
- There is a much lower turnover of retailers.
- Businesses now stay open later into the evenings.
- Many businesses have broken sales records.
- Average age of population is dropping - young people want to live there.
- Increase in conferences, conventions, and trade shows.



89 Is this a restaurant or just a retail store for purchasing oysters?



90 Add some sidewalk cafe dining. Add a menu board.



91 Add a cedar screening fence and put pyramidalis shrubs in front.

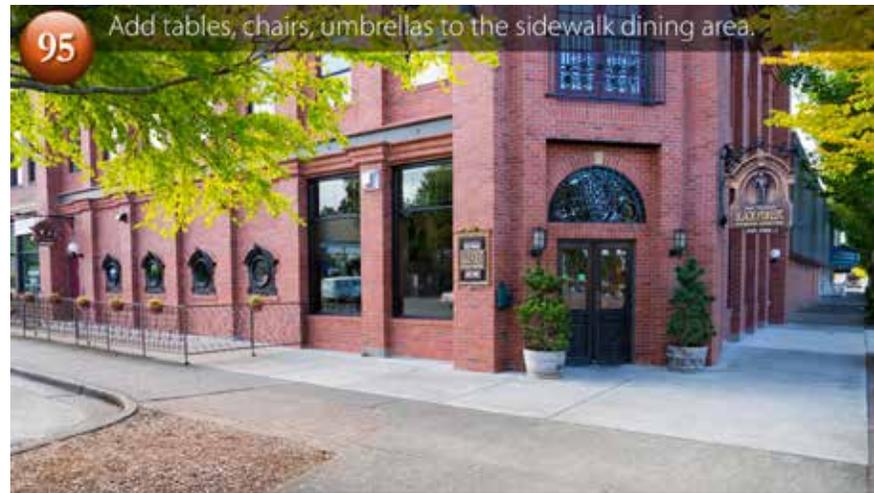
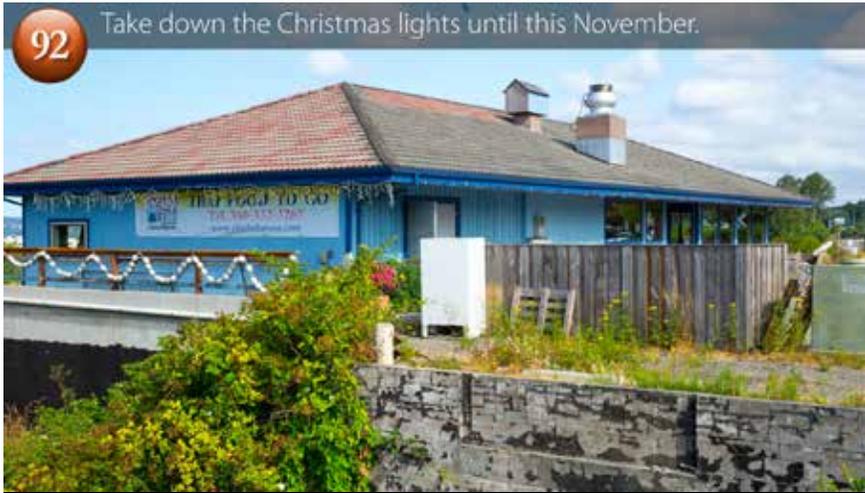


Attract locals downtown with activities, events, and fun things to do, and then retailers will follow. Retailers and restaurants will open where the people spend time.

Some of the businesses are doing a very good job, but there aren't enough to do it all by themselves. This fresh oyster merchant (top left) has a shop that looks great, but we weren't sure if it was a restaurant or a seafood merchant. Make the signage more clear.

Tony's (top right) looks great too.

Some shops and restaurants need to step back and look at their stores with fresh eyes, like this one (bottom left). It does have some nice flowers, but the dumpsters and utility boxes next to the door detract from its appeal. They should be screened with nice cedar fencing and perhaps a row of Pyramidalis like these (bottom right).



Take down the Christmas lights (top left and right), and remove the take out boxes from inside the window. Remove weeds from the parking lot.

If there are empty sign brackets like those above (bottom left), they should be removed.

And add outdoor dining! (bottom right) Outdoor dining can really help bring a downtown to life. Use Catalina-style umbrellas and pots to add intimacy. This is a gorgeous building.



96 You need to orchestrate the “critical mass”

The Ten+Ten+Ten Rule

Area Minimum in three lineal blocks

Ten places that sell food: Soda fountain, coffee shop, bistro, cafe, sit-down restaurant, wine store, deli, confectionary.

Ten destination retail shops: Galleries, antiques (not second hand stores), collectibles, books, clothing, home accents, outfitters, brand-specific businesses, garden specialties, kitchen stores, cigars, etc.

Ten places open after 6:00: Entertainment, theater (movies, performing arts), bars & bistros, specialty shops, dining, open air markets, etc.

Some of the businesses are working very hard to do a good job and stay in business (top left and right). But there aren't enough of them to make downtown Blaine a destination for locals and visitors.

Sometimes it requires a recruitment effort. First, you get people to come downtown by making it a more active place - by programming plazas. Then, you recruit more businesses, and you orchestrate your business mix.

Downtown businesses are much more successful if they follow the Rule of Critical Mass: the 10+10+10 Rule. This would include a MINIMUM, in three

lineal blocks:

- TEN places that sell food: soda fountain, coffee shop, bistro, cafe, fine dining, family restaurant, wine store, deli, bakery, confectionary.
- TEN destination retail shops: galleries, antiques, home accents, outfitters, collectibles, books, kitchen supplies, garden.
- TEN places open after 6:00 pm: entertainment, theater, performing arts, bars and bistros, specialty shops, dining, open air markets, etc.



Successful downtowns need to have a “critical mass” of like businesses. Think of antique malls, food courts, gas stations. People are attracted to the choices, and all the shops do more business when they are clustered together.

One great example is Argyle Street in Halifax (bottom left and right). They have at least 22 restaurants clustered in 2-1/2 blocks, and they are thriving.

Argyle Street is up a very steep hill in Halifax. It had a couple restaurants, but most people wanted to spend their time at the waterfront. One of the

restaurant owners decided he'd like to try to develop a “restaurant row” on Argyle Street, complete with outdoor dining. He approached the city about giving up the parking spaces in front of his restaurant to allow for outdoor dining, and the city said okay. He recruited more restaurants, all providing outdoor dining, and the project took on a life of its own. Now, with 22 restaurants and more along the side streets (bottom right), Argyle Street is busier with dining and nightlife than the waterfront. And the city is building a huge convention center on Argyle Street. That is the power of “critical mass.”



Another great restaurant on Argyle Street in Halifax (top left).

Achieving critical mass is well worth the effort. Work with the property owners and recruit the tenants you need to make downtown successful. It only takes one-third buy-in by property owners before the effort takes on a life of its own. Start with a focus of what you want Blaine to be known for.

I love this little cafe (top right). If Blaine wanted to develop a culinary brand, they could recruit 20 more restaurants, and they would be a destination for

people from miles away. The city has great potential. The setting is unbeatable! (bottom left)

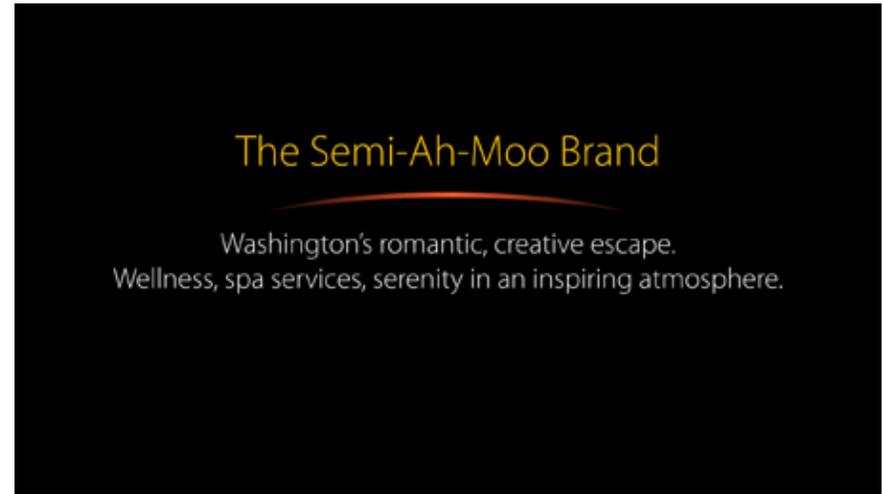


While in the area of Blaine, we had to go check out Semiahmoo. On our way, we saw this sign for tourist attractions (top left). There weren't any listed, so it's best to just take down the sign.

We saw the sign for the Great Blue Heron restaurant, and for the golf and country club, and we wondered if the golf course is open for public play (top right). If so, let us know on your signage.

I was so excited to see that Semiahmoo is open again. It is a fabulous place,

and it's very exciting to see it coming back to life. It looks great.



We saw the trail, which we consider to be one of the best walking trails in the Northwest (top left). Walking trails are not the primary reason someone would drive two hours to visit, but they are a terrific amenity. It's worth taking the Plover from Blaine - a perfect "while you're here" activity.

Semiamhoo could be known as Washington's romantic, creative escape.

On to Bellingham - next 7 exits (bottom left).

The first exit doesn't have signs telling you where to go to find anything. The wayfinding on the freeway doesn't match up with the signs off the freeway. On the freeway, signs tell you to take the next exit for the sculpture exhibit, but once off the freeway, you only find wayfinding to shopping, Seahome Village, downtown, and Lakeway Center. I never found Seahome Village or Lakeway Center.



101 Add signage, visitor information, maps - ANYTHING!



102 Thank you! Add a take-out map for distribution - and BHam info.



103 The arboretum is in big need of some maintenance. Start here.

We did find the Sehome Hill Arboretum (top left), so we decided to check it out. Came to a parking lot and thought this must be where the arboretum is located (top right). But no, I followed the road as it continued and found this sign telling about the arboretum (bottom left). Add "Welcome" to your text - it's always important to welcome visitors to your attractions, parks, and amenities. Let people know you're glad they came. Add some map brochures in a weather-proof brochure holder so that visitors can take information with them to navigate the trail and learn about the arboretum.

We saw the tunnel, which was very pretty. The interpretive sign for the tunnel (bottom right) is in need of maintenance, in fact, the whole arboretum could use some TLC.



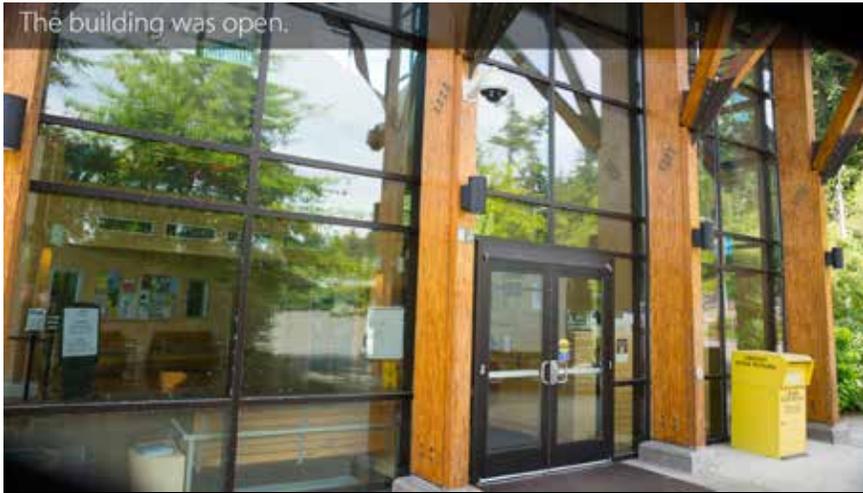
We found the lookout tower (top left) which is a very cool structure. A family was just coming down and they told us not to bother going up, because you couldn't see any views from the top. We went up anyway, and they were right (top right). What a shame!

Suggestion: Trim some of the alder trees back. Try to create some view corridors to make the arboretum a better experience.

Suggestion 105: Drop the arboretum from the marketing effort. It's a nice local

asset, and makes for a pleasant walk, but it's not a visitor attraction.

Saw that there was visitor information at the University campus, and I went to check it out. The sign says "closed" (bottom left). But there's information available, so it's not closed. Turn off the closed sign - even if it's not staffed, there's information available, and you don't want to tell people to go away unnecessarily. Add information about the University! (bottom right)



In spite of the visitor information "closed" sign, the building was open (top left). I went in, and there was plenty of visitor information available (top right), even though the staff wasn't on duty.

We saw the visitor information sign on I-5 northbound - add the sign for southbound travelers as well (bottom left).

We went into the tourism office (bottom right), and they did a very good job of answering questions and helping. The office looks great, is welcoming, and it provides 24/7 information outside.

While there, I asked about a good place to have lunch. Many VICs won't give you the names of specific restaurants (which is very non-visitor-friendly), but these folks did. They recommended a restaurant and gave me directions. Yay!



I found it, and it's a place I probably wouldn't have chosen without the recommendation I received, because it really didn't have any beautification and was in a strip mall (top left). And it was great! Terrific, fresh food!

As I was leaving I looked around and saw a great looking micro-brew pub across the street (bottom left), and a wonderful market on another corner (bottom right). What a terrific corner. I came away with a pound of cherries after eating my lunch. The intersection of James and Carolina is worth promoting!



I wanted to take a look at the Bellingham Airport (top left), and I have to say that it is first class. It's gorgeous (top right). An airport that would be a pleasure to travel from.

While there, I saw two reasons people would come all the way from Seattle: the helicopter tours and the scenic flights (bottom left). Can you imagine the amazing scenic flights and helicopter tours over some of the most beautiful scenery in the country? The San Juans and Mt. Baker would be awesome to see from the air. These would be worth coming a long way for.

It's important to promote your "anchor tenants" - those attractions that make you worth a special trip. They need to be promoted specifically. Then, while people are here, they'll spend time shopping, going to restaurants, spending the night, etc. And the longer they stay, the more they will spend.

Once you take the exit, there are no signs to historic attractions.



111 Finally. (No luck southbound). "Downtown" instead of City Center.



112 Consider calling this area "Uptown" and then "Downtown"



Aha. Here's downtown Bellingham. Good first impression.

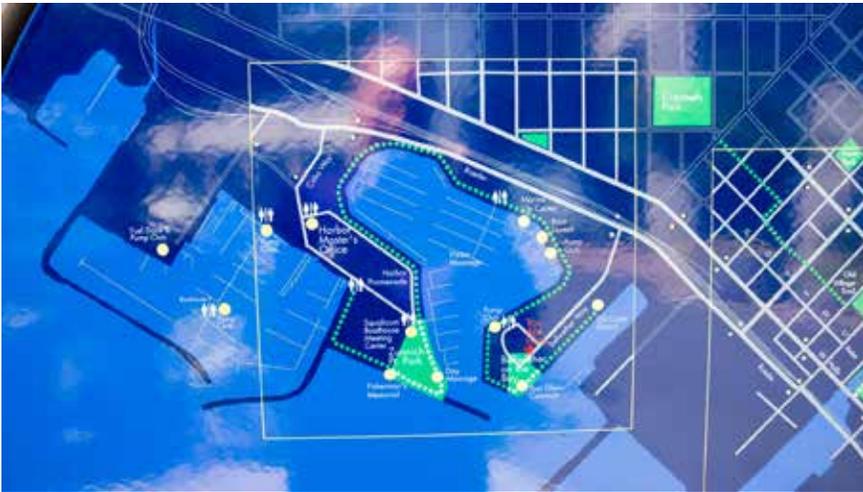


We got back on I-5 to go to downtown Bellingham. There are numerous exits for Bellingham, and checked out many of them, not knowing which ones led to downtown. This sign (top left) indicates that there are historic attractions off this exit, but once you leave I-5, there are no more signs to help you find them.

We finally came to the exit that says "City Center" (top right). We suggest you change the name to "Downtown" rather than City Center. There were a number of restaurants and tourist activities noted on signs along I-5, but once you leave the freeway, there are no additional signs to help find them. A county-

wide wayfinding system would fix that problem. Always make sure your directional signage extends all the way to the destination.

As soon as you get off I-5, there are signs indicating that you are downtown (bottom left). The whole area is not downtown - you want to differentiate your downtown shopping district from the outer parts of the city. Consider calling this area "uptown." And we suggest you give the true downtown its own unique name, making it a destination. The pole banners are beautiful (bottom left), and here is the gateway into the true downtown (bottom right). Very nice.



I decided to start out at the waterfront, and it was easy to find. I found the Bellwether (top left), and the waterfront looks great. I noticed these information panels (top right), but they didn't have a lot of information on them. Consider adding more information, cross-selling other parts of downtown, shops, restaurants, activities, events, and more.

Having the map (bottom left) was good, but it would have been even better to have a small map brochure I could take with me.

The Bellwether looks gorgeous (bottom right), and I've always wanted to stay

there. I had asked my assistant to look into it, and she said that the TripAdvisor reviews weren't very good - that the lodging seemed "dated." So when the manager of the Townplace Suites called and invited me to stay there, we went with them.

It's critical to watch your reviews on TripAdvisor. Always respond. If they are negative, don't respond defensively; thank the reviewer and tell them how you are working to make the situation better. Responding to reviews goes a long way to alleviating any negative effects of the review. It shows you care.



This is what makes you worth a special trip.



113 This should be front and center in your marketing.



The setting is spectacular, but the activities will bring us here.



114 A Bellingham "Best of."

We saw Blues, Brews & BBQ (top left), and it looks like so much fun. These types of places are what makes Bellingham worth a special trip.

We saw the sailing classes in the bay (top right), and thought this was so cool! I called my wife and daughter and said that next time we visit Washington, I want us to bring them and the grandkids up to Bellingham and do this. One thing about multi-generational travel is that we want it to be activities that will create wonderful, lasting memories.

The setting in Bellingham (bottom left) is fantastic. It's the activities that attract people, though.

One time we came to Bellingham and had dinner with friends at Giuseppe's (bottom right). It was awesome. This should be one of Bellingham's "Best Of's."



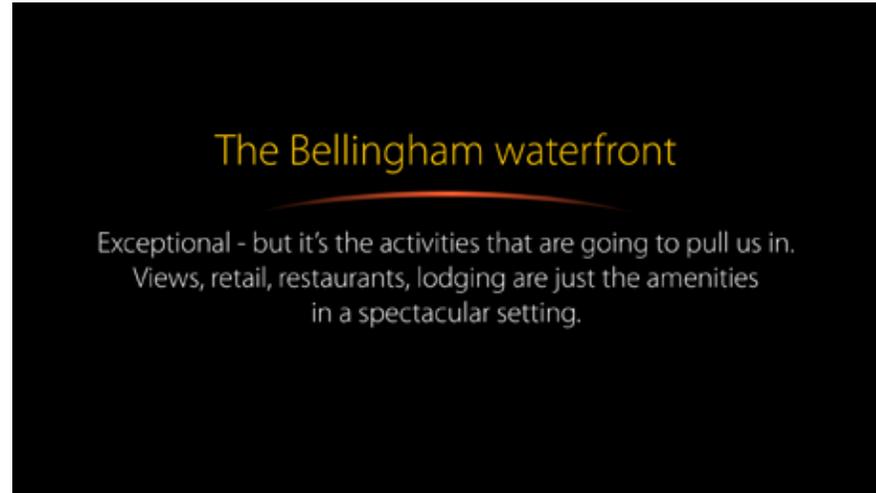
One thing I noticed about Bellweather is that it seems that whoever can pay the rent is allowed to set up shop. There isn't an orchestrated business mix. There are some nice spas (top left), but there's also an Edward Jones office, and other offices. Work towards having an orchestrated business mix so that you can achieve a critical mass of like businesses - that's what will attract people to the area.

We saw the outstanding Squalicum Harbor gateway sign (top right). It is very well done - it really makes a statement.

These are the activities that make Bellingham worth a special trip and an overnight stay (bottom left and right). Kayak rentals with a wonderful bay to use them on, other marine and outdoor activities, and sailing and boating in the San Juans, with Bellingham as the hub or starting point. These should be promoted.



Cruises and whale watching tours (top left) are also fantastic activities, as well as specialty cruises, like the Beer & Brats Cruise (top right). Fly fishing, paddle boarding and lessons (bottom left and right) are also extra-special activities that should be promoted.



But how can anyone take advantage of all the wonderful activities at the waterfront when they can only park for two hours? (top left) Two hour parking limits can kill a downtown. Is there all-day parking anywhere nearby? There should be, and there should be signs that direct visitors to the all-day parking.

Instead of calling it "Old Town," think up a more descriptive name - a name that evokes emotion, such as "The Distillery District" or "The Seaport District."

The area looks great. We loved the picnic benches outside the Waterfront Seafood & Bar (bottom right).



The Chuckanut Brewery looks great (top left), and Jalapenos (top right) looks fun with its bright facade. It could use more beautification - add some pots and a more pedestrian-friendly entrance.

We saw the workforce training center and saw that it has a happy hour (bottom left). This was confusing - is this a restaurant? If so, where is the sign? Make it obvious what you are - add a permanent sign here letting people know you are a restaurant.

This museum is an iconic building (bottom right). It's gorgeous.



There was very little parking, though. All the spaces were full, but there is plenty of room to add more parking spaces here (top left).

The mural (top right) is beautiful, and the wayfinding signage is good and easy to read. However, your wayfinding should also include directions to the other districts, such as the Arts District.

We did find the Arts District (bottom left), and it's fantastic. Good pole banners, and I saw the Pickford Film Center (bottom right), which looks great. By the time I found a place to park, though, I forgot where the Spark Museum was - I could have driven there, but it didn't have any place to park. The open hours are too restrictive - you can call for an appointment to see the museum, but how many visitors will actually do that?



I was, frankly, amazed at what a great place Bellingham has become (top left). It's very cosmopolitan - it's come so far from what it used to be when I lived there years ago. Every time I came into downtown, night or day, it was busy - alive with people. I remember Rocket Donuts (top right) and now it is very cool.

Having the vendor booths on the plaza (bottom left) is great. The Mt. Baker Theater is also a terrific place (bottom right). There needs to be more of a connection made between this area and downtown, though. A good wayfinding system will help with that.

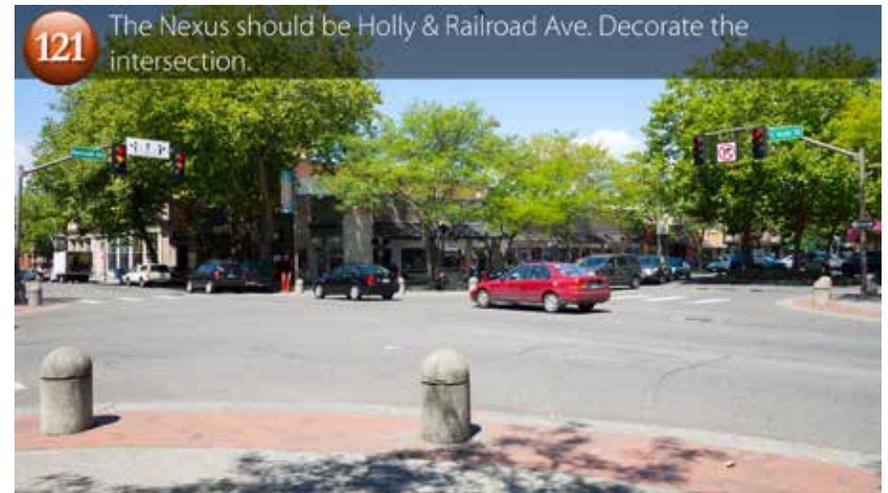


I saw alleys in Bellingham like this (top left), and it made me think of Art Alley in Rapid City, South Dakota. In Rapid City, they've allowed graffiti artists go wild (top right, bottom left and right).

They have set rules for the graffiti: No swastikas; no profanity; respect other people's art (so don't paint over other people's work). They also require that approval of the property owners is given first.

They've painted everything, and it's such a wide variety of styles and subject

matter that it would be impossible to get bored looking at it. In fact, it has become a huge tourism attraction.



Here are some more examples of Art Alley in Rapid City (top left and right). This is a great way to show the creative, artistic spirit of the community and make an attraction for both locals and visitors to enjoy.

Suggestion: Give the downtown core its own name. There are many different districts that all currently fall under the umbrella of downtown, and you could differentiate the core downtown shopping area with its own unique name. Use the name to promote a "feeling" - evoke emotion.

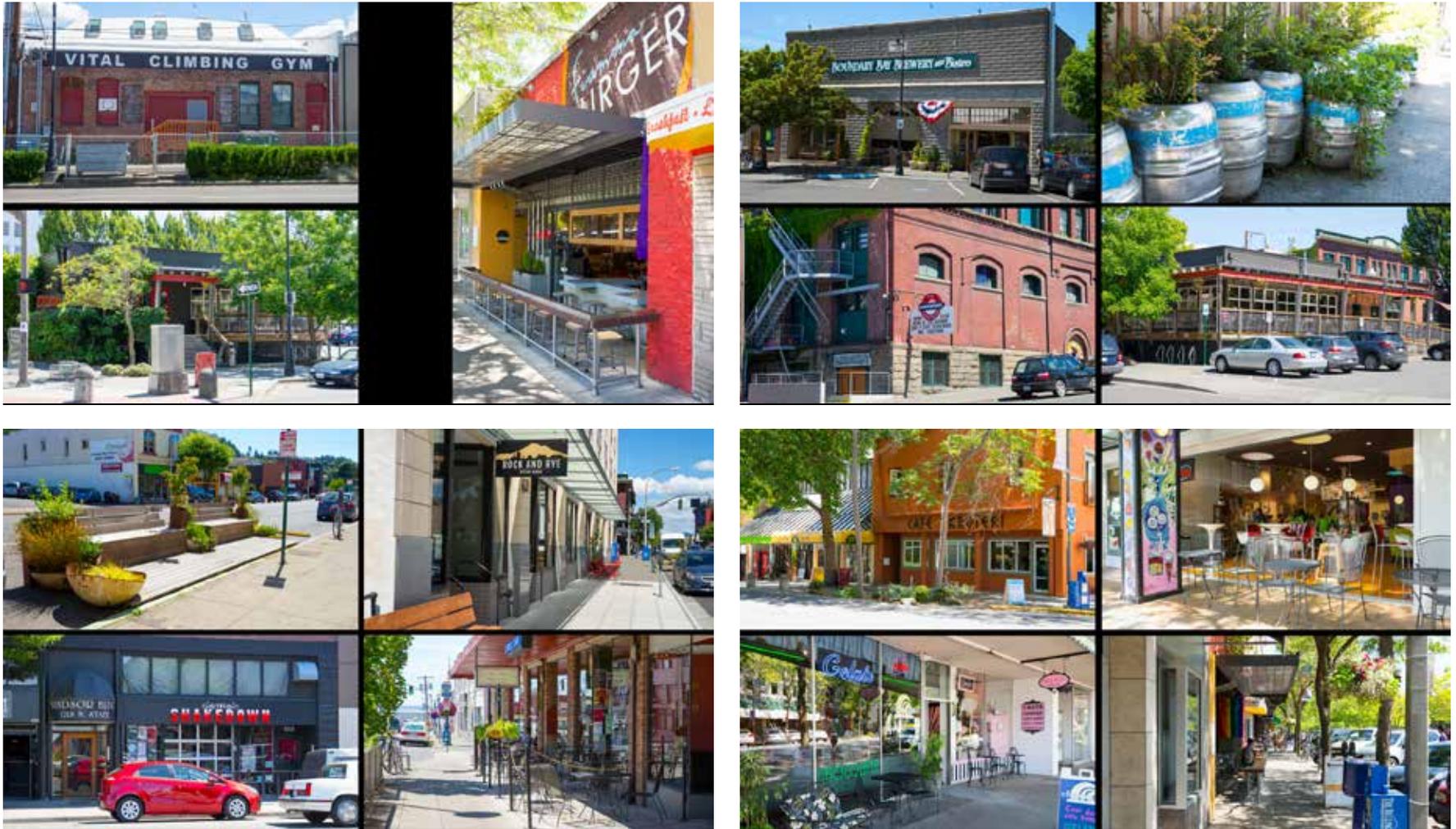
The center of downtown should be Holly & Railroad Avenue (bottom right). This intersection should be beautified and decorated.



At the center of Brea, California, they decorated the intersection with these pavers (top left). It looks fantastic, and really makes a statement.

Another idea is to use StreetPrint's duratherm of stamping and coloring asphalt (top right). It is weather resistant and durable enough to withstand snow removal. It can be done in any color and design, and it's an excellent way to dress up an intersection or to make decorative crosswalks.

I was so impressed with downtown Bellingham, I couldn't stop taking photos. It is an awesome downtown, and it is so much more than what I had been expecting. The streets, shops, restaurants - everything looks fun and vibrant.



What a great way to do planters with a theme (top far right). This is awesome. There were three situations that I experienced while downtown that were very negative, and very concerning. Three times I witnessed men suddenly start screaming profanities at other people. Once it was a man who started screaming at a woman in a car. Every word from his mouth was a profanity. She was terrified. Another time a man started screaming at another man on the sidewalk. The man was going to turn around and engage in a confrontation, and I stopped him, and just told him to let it go. Fortunately he did. Three times I saw this happen in my short time in downtown Bellingham,

and they were all during the middle of the day. Only once did I see a policeman, that was in front of the police station itself. You need to have more of a police presence downtown. Those situations are frightening for people, and it gives the very strong impression that downtown Bellingham is not safe. This situation needs to be brought under control. I wasn't sure what type of place Shakedown was (bottom far left). I thought it was a bike shop, but it turns out it's a bar. Merchants need to make it obvious what type of establishment they have - what it is they're selling. Promote the primary lure before the name of the store. Perhaps "Shakedown Bar"?



122 Remember: Curb appeal can account for 70% of first-time sales.

Update this with professional art, and out of the 70s.



123 Time to move into the 21st Century.



I cannot say enough great things about downtown Bellingham. But you know what's really going to get us to come downtown? It's these activities (top left). The Mount Baker Bicycle Club event. Beer, improv & food truck. Summer nights. These things are awesome.

The events will bring us here for the first time. Then, once we see it, we'll want to come back.

So, we might come here initially for the kayaking, the boating, the bicycling,

the events, but after we're done, we want to have things to do after 6:00. Fortunately, Bellingham does have enough restaurants, bars, and activities that are open later into the evening hours.

Time to address the parking issue in downtown Bellingham. Three times I had to go into a bank to get change to feed your old, outdated parking meters. Once, when I was waiting in line holding a five dollar bill, the manager saw me and asked if I just needed change for parking. When I answered yes, he asked me how many rolls of quarters I would like. That is really sad.



Most lots have all three choices.
If you don't have a phone and no change, you can use a credit card at the kiosk.



In new lots they use these zone/space markers saving the cost of meters.
They also have kiosks, or you can call if you don't have a smartphone app.



The next time I used the meter it took about 15-seconds.
- opened the app
- Zone 110
- Space 184
- 4 hours, \$2.35
Done.



Technology has advanced for paid parking, and Bellingham should jump on board. There are several options, but I'll share one option with you.

Passport parking maps out every parking space and mounts stickers that have a QR code on each meter. There is a small user fee, but no cost to the city. People pay a little more to park for the convenience they receive.

You can pay for your parking by phone, by quarter, or by credit card at a kiosk.

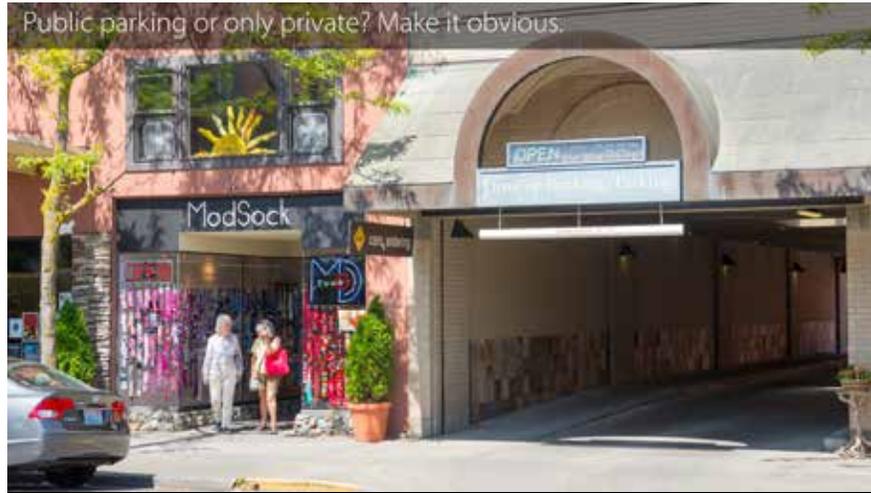
The app to pay by phone is free. You can also call them and pay by phone.

My first time experience, I scanned the QR code. Within 20 seconds I had the app. It uses location services to determine my location, and I gave myself a user name and password. I entered the zone and space, then I input a credit card, and entered how long I wanted to pay for.

The app told me that even though the meter wouldn't show any time, they know I paid for the parking. It would text me 15 minutes prior to my time limit. If the meter allows for more time, I can recharge it by paying for more time. This only took three minutes. Easy way to pay for parking.



The bottom line: it's easy.
Wisconsin Dells (population 2,500) generates \$400,000 a year in parking fees.
Maintenance, enforcement: \$150,000
Gross margin: \$250,000. This is invested back into downtown.



Public parking or only private? Make it obvious.



124 This is scary and awful. Redevelop the sign, add murals, etc.



125 Develop a Blade Sign program. What's down here? Anything?

Parking kiosks operate from a solar panel on top. In new lots they use zone/space markers, saving the cost of installing meters. It's easy for the customer and for the city, and it saves the city money.

Parking should not be a general fund revenue source. It should be put back into the district from which it was earned.

I was glad to hear that you are fixing this parking garage entrance (bottom left) so that it won't be so scary.

Can you tell what's in any of these shops? (bottom right) Bellingham needs to start a blade sign program. Perpendicular signs make it possible for people to see what shops are down the street.



126

This should become a year round "Public Market" open at least four days a week.

- Chainsaw carvers
- Pottery exhibitions
- Steam punk festival (tie to Fairhaven)
- Concerts & music shows
- Ice carvers
- Farmers Markets
- Outdoor exposition
- Arts and crafts shows
- ComicCon events

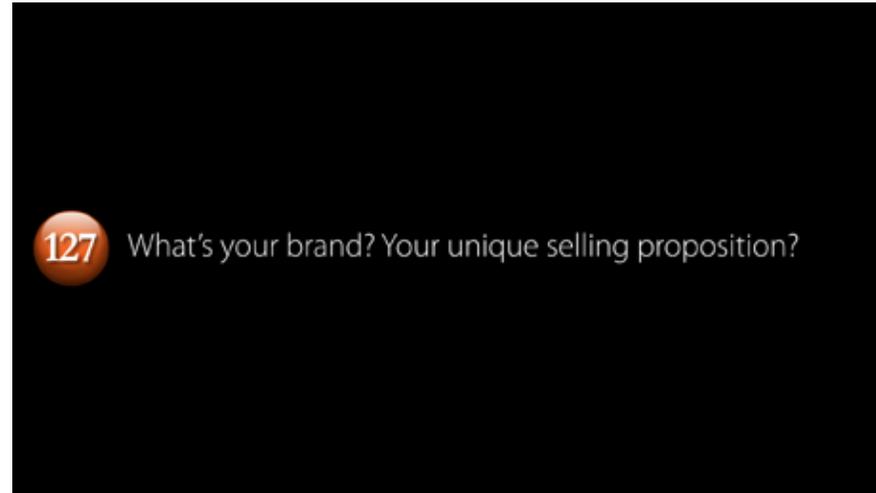


Can you see what's in any of these shops? (top left and right) Give us a reason to walk down the street by enticing us with signs that tell us what we'll find. Most successful downtowns use blade signs. They should be decorative, a consistent height and size, and promote what it is the shop is selling before the name of the shop.

This market (bottom left and right) is fabulous! What a great asset for the city, its locals, and for visitors. But it's almost a crime that it isn't used for more than the one day a week farmers market. It should be in use at least four days

a week, nearly every week of the year. It can be more than a farmers market, becoming a public market with local crafts, prepared foods, concerts and performances, events and exhibits. Public markets are tourism draws - they are major attractions.

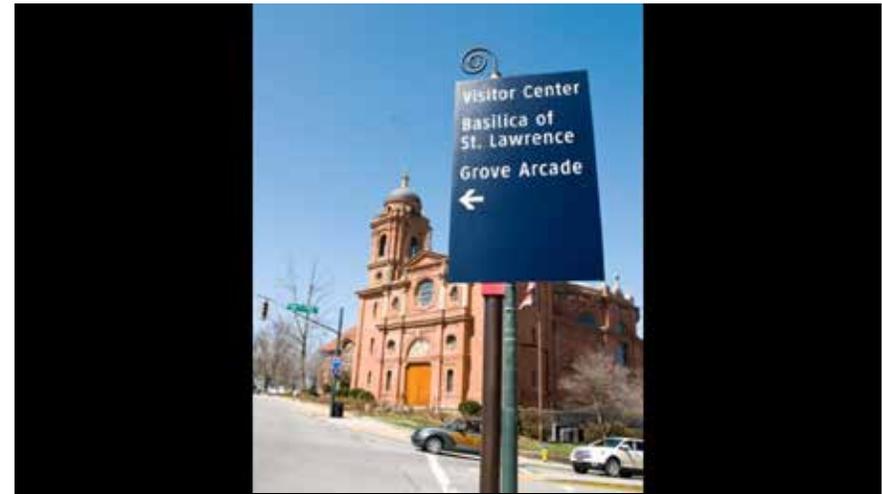
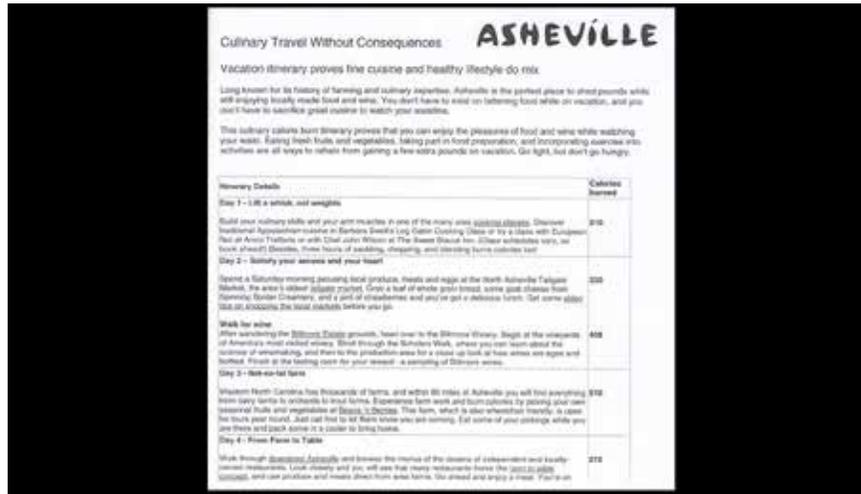
I did see some posters about the farmers market, but there should be signs that tell people when and where the market is. If any other events are currently held here, I didn't see anything about them.



The yellow star (top left) shows the intersection of Railroad Avenue and Holly, which is pretty much the center of downtown. The Market Depot is at the bottom blue star, and the transit station is the top blue star. Pretty much your entire downtown core is within the yellow highlighted area. This should be the boundary of the area you call downtown - and we suggest you give it a special name, such as "Rail District." Each of the other areas - the waterfront, the arts district, have their own designations. Don't try to make your downtown too big. You have enough unique attractions in the other districts for them to stand on their own.

Thinking about what sets Bellingham, and each city and town in Whatcom County, apart, we came up with some of our own ideas. Our thoughts:

- Lake Samish: Stand-up paddle boarding, serene, peaceful.
- Fairhaven: One of the best art towns in the West with a touch of irreverence.
- Ferndale: Western, pioneer spirit, saloons: a classic car and motorcycle gathering place.
- Birch Bay: Family beach getaway. Warmer waters, kinder beaches, flat-out fun.



More branding ideas:

- Lynden: Washington's Dutch village with farm to table dining.
- Sumas: Provisioning headquarters for the Mt. Baker experience.
- Semiahmoo: Washington's romantic, creative retreat. Wellness, spa, serenity in an inspiring setting.
- Bellingham: Washington's Microbrew & Distillery Capital. Mixed with funky, edgy people and creative souls in a truly organic setting.

We felt that Bellingham makes a perfect bookend to Portland. In fact, Bellingham makes us think of Asheville, North Carolina. With the Biltmore

Estate, Asheville has the finest in fine culture, combined with a downtown of counter-culture. It's funky, fun, and fabulous. It has itineraries that promote culinary travel without consequences (top left), telling you what activities to do in their town to burn off the delicious food you've enjoyed. Its wayfinding signs are topped with unique finials that display the town's artistry (top right).

Asheville turned some of its transportation shelters into vendor stalls, where local artisans sell their unique wares (bottom left). They converted their closed Woolworth store into a co-op gallery of up-and-coming artists (bottom right).



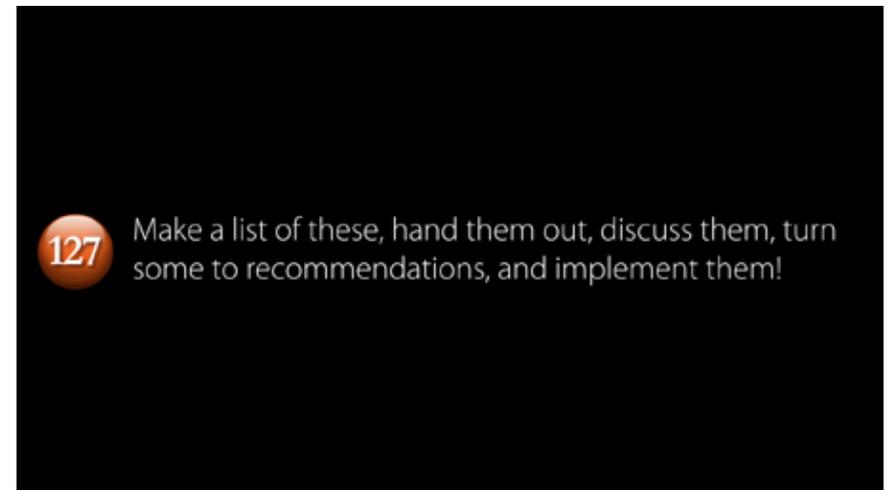
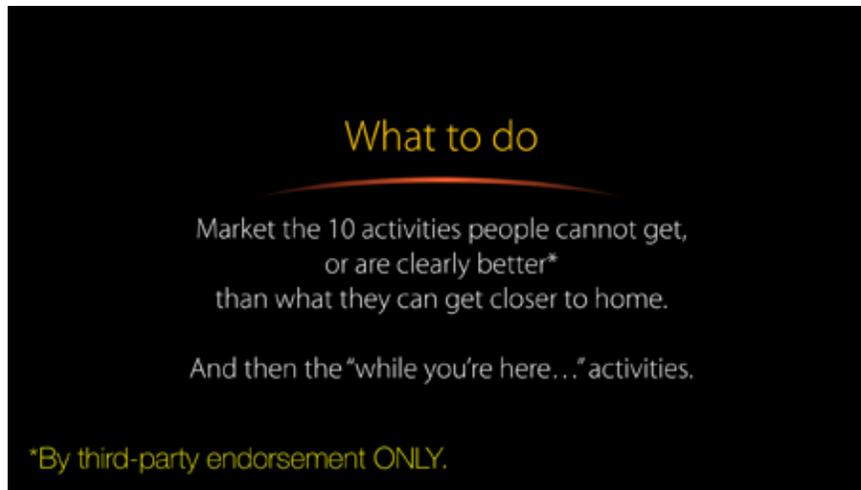
- Chile
- Curacao
- Stockholm
- Amalfi Coast
- Copenhagen
- Mozambique
- New York City

Asheville has street musicians and performers all day, every day (top left and right). They have chessboards in their downtown parks, where locals gather every day to try to beat their most challenging opponents (bottom left). Downtown Asheville is active and alive every day, all day, all year round.

Livability.com named Asheville one of the “top five cities to live in” in the U.S.

Fodor’s named Asheville the number one place they were going to in 2011 (bottom right).

Bellingham is just as fabulous.



So how do you package all this into an umbrella brand for Whatcom County?

First of all, you don't market the county - people aren't interested in going to a county. You market the unique blend of activities that people can't find closer to home. You market the overall feeling that people will find here. Some thoughts:

- An amazing blend of spirits

What you have here is flat-out amazing. Pick your season. Pick your passion. Marketing your activities by passion will entice visitors here.

Make a list of these suggestions, discuss them, and make plans to bring the suggestions that have merit to life in your communities. Work together.

And remember: "The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is today."

Marketing Assessment

Visitor Information Website: www.bellingham.org

Like many visitor websites, this one leads with the location. While that may seem like the obvious choice, it is actually more effective to lead with experiences first, location second. People don't make the decision to visit a community based first on its location. They choose to visit a place because of what they will do when they are there.

The "Things To Do" section is quite extensive, but is broken into categories that are helpful. The one thing it lacks is a distinct focus – answering the question, what makes Bellingham worth a special trip?

Itineraries are a great way to showcase what a community has to offer and help a potential visitor envision and plan their trip. The PDF itinerary cards are a nice feature.

The one thing I'd suggest with the itineraries is perhaps making them easier to find and more prominent, perhaps with a button on the sidebar.

There are a lot of sections that are quite copy heavy. This is a bit hard to avoid, because the website is the place for detail. But try to incorporate more photography and bullet points amid the portions of text. Most people scan internet copy, and you want to make it easy for them to find what they're looking for.

The site also uses "list marketing" – that is, simply listing everything in any given category. While there may be space for lists on a website, lists don't do enough to close the sale. There should be more focus on what makes Bellingham unique, and that includes the experiences and attractions. Promote the "anchor tenants" first and foremost and everyone will benefit.

Printed marketing materials

We received a very large packet of marketing materials, including a visitor guide and various individual brochures and maps. It was nice how they were tucked into a folder.

Visitor Guide

The visitor guide is a nice piece, overall. The quality is excellent, and the layout, despite having advertising, isn't as busy as many community visitor guides can be.

We love the way it is laid out with the various activities first, then the communities, food, lodging, and additional information.

The recreation and entertainment sections are nicely done, with lots of enticing photography and descriptions of activities.

For the Trails, we suggest you have trail maps on your website and refer to the downloadable page URL in the brochure, so visitor have the option of downloading and printing the maps in addition to stopping by your visitor information center. Only about 5% of visitors actually will stop at a VIC.

In your golfing section, be sure to let readers know if a golf course is open for public play.

It bears keeping in mind the use and audience for any printed materials. Most people do their planning online, but once they are in the area, they use printed guides for reference and to refine their itineraries, double-checking what they want to do.

Understanding the audience and use of the piece may help inform the layout and content of future editions, with a focus on making it useful for the visitor while they are in Bellingham.

This piece should include more emphasis on top attractions and activities, as well as easy to read descriptions and information that is relevant to the visitor who is already there, rather than making it a sales piece designed to entice visitors to come. There's really not enough detail to use the visitor guide to plan an itinerary or decide what to do once in the area. Add more specific information, such as, for each community, include perhaps five each of the top local picks for activities, dining, photo opportunities, events, and hidden gems.

The website is where most decision-making takes place. The printed materials are used primarily to make the visit more enjoyable.

Brochures

There are a number of brochures and rack cards, catering to individual tastes and categories.

One important thing to mention about brochures and rack cards is that the location should never be at the top. Lead with the experience. For example, the whale watching brochure says “WHALES” at the top. This is what people will see in a brochure display. Visitors will see the title, know instantly what the brochure is about, and grab accordingly.

Brochures that lead with location don’t do anything to tell the visitor what they’ll find. Again, people don’t make decisions based on locations, they make decisions based on what they want to DO.

Another example: the Chuckanut Drive brochure leads with “Chuckanut Drive.” Instead, this brochure could have a title such as, “Scenic Drive,” which tells the visitor exactly what this brochure is for. If they are interested in learning more, they will take one and the info about where the drive is located will be there.

We loved the Whatcom Wine & Spirits Trail brochure. It has a good map and enough information about each featured winery and distillery to be helpful. Suggestion: Name it simply “Wine & Spirits Trail” in bright yellow text on a dark background, and then, below, add Whatcom County.

The various maps in the map brochures were quite good. It is very common to find maps that are not helpful at all, and yours are some of the best we’ve seen.

For each town’s brochure, consider creating a “Best Of” guide instead of the existing brochure (more on that below).

We suggest adding these marketing pieces to your repertoire:

“**Best Of**” Guides for Bellingham, for Lynden, for Blaine, for Fairhaven, and for Birch Bay. If you feel that other towns need their own “Best Of” guides as well, that’s fine.

What do you have in Whatcom County that I can’t get anywhere else? Your “anchor tenants” are your very best businesses or attractions that people would go out of their way specifically to visit. You need to promote them in “Best Of Guides.”

Use fairly strict criteria to select which businesses will be included. These brochures can be a public/private partnership, with the invited participants contributing the cost for their panel. Include the best shops, best restaurants, and best activities for each town, and each “best” would have a full panel. They should not look like ads, though. They should be in an advertorial format, with some great photography and very specific text to let visitors know why this is one of the best.

Don’t include lodging facilities in these brochures, because we want lodging facilities to hand them out. They should be available at all visitor information centers and kiosks, as well as at lodging facilities, retail shops and restaurants throughout the county.

With some flexibility, the criteria should include:

- Must be highly regarded (80%+ positive peer reviews, regional publications)
- Must have good curb appeal
- Must be open year round (with some exceptions)
- Must be open until at least 6:00 pm and be open six days a week
- Must be unique to your town (no chains)

These “Best Of” Guides are very effective at increasing visitor spending – you are promoting specific attractions, shops, and restaurants, and those specifics are what can really lure visitors to the towns. They want to check out these great places. While they are there, they will also go into the other businesses, especially if they have great curb appeal. Everyone benefits.



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