

## Commentary

# Tourism product development key to regional recovery, resiliency

By CORY JOBE

Creating the Next Great Destination in Southwest Illinois is more than just a few nice words – it’s a plan that is taking



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shape in the Great Rivers & Routes region which will create transformative change, give the area a boost in economic development and create a place where families and retirees will relocate.

Key to the success of this plan is Tourism Product Development. Tourism took a big hit during the pandemic but it’s now on the rebound. We are seeing a renewed sentiment among travelers to hit the road again and explore new places and have new experiences. Hotels in our region report that they are starting to bounce back to pre-pandemic occupancy levels. Locally owned and operated small businesses and restaurants are getting back on their feet and celebrating a return to normal operations.

Probably the most phenomenal news is the number of new businesses opening in our region right now. We are seeing growth in the number of new restaurants and hotels that are opening their doors in Southwest Illinois. The Sports tourism economy is ready to explode in our region as new tournaments are eyeing the area for upcoming multi-million-

dollar events. Three major river cruise lines are planning more than 60 stops in our region this year alone bringing thousands of new travelers to the region with an economic impact in the millions.

Southwest Illinois is literally on the precipice of becoming the Next Great Destination and the ideal place to visit, live and raise a family.

It’s important that the residents of the region appreciate what new product development will do for the livability of our local communities and the region as a whole. Active living amenities are highly sought after by young families, retirees and new start-ups. This isn’t just about visitors, small businesses and revenues – it’s about livability and improved quality of life for people who live here.

To give our six-county region that livability edge, we know we need to be forward thinking and to develop new tourism products, strategies and thinking around outdoor recreation, nature-based tourism, and Route 66. Route 66 will turn 100 years old in 2026. Route 66 is one of several Corridors of Opportunity in the region along with Illinois Route 3 and U.S. Route 67.

Southwest Illinois is ideally situated to become an outdoor recreation mecca. As we speak, we have hundreds of miles of nationally recognized biking and hiking trails through Madison County Transit and the Metro East Parks and Recreation District. We have three mighty rivers traversing the region forming a great confluence of rivers that launched a nation with the Lewis and Clark expedition. We are home to three state parks – includ-

ing the largest – Pere Marquette State Park in Grafton and probably one of the oldest, and a UNESCO World Heritage Site at Cahokia Mounds. We host two Federal Wildlife Refuges and a 50,000-acre footprint of Corps of Engineers Open Space. We have the only outdoor rock-climbing trails within a 100-mile radius. The region is home to two major water parks and numerous splash pads. Lake Lou Yaeger in Litchfield is a premier family recreation spot offering boating, fishing, camping, and lodging. We are sitting right on the Mississippi River National Water Trail which is being discovered by more and more paddlers.

For those searching for nature-based tourism and on-the-water river adventures, scenic bicycle rides and hiking adventures, this region is ideally situated to reveal itself as an important active living center. Product development in these areas would include a kayak/canoe outfitter and easy river access. Access to bike rentals would also be key.

The Last 100 Miles of historic Route 66 is primed for a new focus and product development through a \$919,000 grant from the State of Illinois. With these funds, an interactive Route 66 Visitor Center and exhibit will be developed in Edwardsville. Carlinville’s historic and quirky Cannonball Jail will receive upgrades and open for the first time to the public. Twelve postcard-style murals will be painted on historic Route 66 buildings in 12 different communities and six metal monuments depicting the classic Route 66 shield will find homes in key

cities. Those projects will be a key piece to increasing visitor engagement along the Mother Road and launch our region to the Centennial celebration in 2026.

That’s not all, of course. The State of Illinois recognizes these assets and has recently provided a \$10 million State capital appropriation earmarked for development of the Meeting of the Great Rivers National Scenic Byway between Hartford and Alton. These funds will help us redefine this historic National Byway and help us grow existing tourism products including the Lewis & Clark Confluence Tower, the Lewis & Clark State Historic Site and Piasa Park in Alton. The funds are also intended to enable the region to develop the Port of Alton for cruise ship access and continue to enhance the Alton riverfront as a destination for travelers. We are also well positioned to compete for additional Federal Byway funds in collaboration with the local, state, and federal agency partners.

We have a lot of work to do in the coming months. We can’t wait years to build the destination we can and should be. It will take all of us working together. We know this region and the Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau is up for the challenge.

Let’s all come together to get this done ... we are already on our way ... and creating the Next Great Destination in Southwest Illinois is within our grasp!

*Cory Jobe is president/CEO of Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau of Southwest Illinois.*

## Even smallest of companies can learn from a multi-brand strategy

By JOHN WILLIAMSON

Think about a brand — maybe a big corporation — that has a hierarchy of other brands and services. Maybe you’re thinking about Amazon which has Prime Video, Audible, and Amazon Echo. Or maybe P&G which owns Gillette, Pampers, Tide, Cascade, and Old Spice. Unilever owns everything from Ben & Jerry’s and Skippy to Lipton and Dove.

While all these corporations sell different products and services, what they all have in common is a clear brand hierarchy. Brand hierarchy is a structure that has a top-level parent company or corporate brand, a secondary level of family brands, and, below that, individual brands.

Brand hierarchy isn’t only reserved for large corporations. Any organization that is composed of multiple brands or services can develop a clear structure, and they should. A lack of organization and intention can undermine business planning and confuse buyers. By clearly defining how your brands and products differentiate and relate to each other, you’re able to market them more effectively.

Here are three ways to cultivate an effective multi-brand strategy:

Identify and eliminate sources of brand confusion: As you study the various product lines in your organization’s portfolio, you might discover some overlap. Think about each brand from a consumer’s perspective: where might the consumer be confused about each brand’s identity and what it represents?

It’s important for every organization to eliminate any internal confusion among its various brands. It’s also imperative to eliminate confusion between its own brands and the similar products and services offered elsewhere in the marketplace. Where do any brand re-

dundancies exist? What’s the missing component that will allow each of your organization’s brands to stand out?

As one example, Innovative Ergonomic Solutions (IES) is a parent company that acquired multiple brands within a short span of time. IES found itself with five different companies all producing ergonomic workspace solutions through various products and channels (HAT Contract, Ergotech, SiS Ergo, CompuCaddy, Innovative Office Products). But without a clear brand hierarchy in place, there was confusion both internally, and in the market, about how these companies related (or didn’t relate) to each other.

With the explosion of growth and acquisition of different product lines and market segments, IES’s challenge was to organize the brands with a clearly defined go-to-market strategy and optimize each brand’s potential while not cannibalizing market share or alienating their dealer network.

Develop a holistic strategy for the organization: Every multi-brand organization should be able to envision its corporate hierarchy in a simple chart featuring a parent brand at the top and each subsidiary brand branching off. In this structure, the main corporate entity oversees multiple subordinate companies organized by their primary sales channels, or other market-defining characteristics.

Once the organization’s internal brand redundancies have been eliminated, the chart should practically fill itself out. This can be a useful tool for determining the common thread uniting every brand in an organization’s portfolio, and where each brand aligns in the marketplace. As you study the chart, ask: is every product offered within the most suitable sales channel? Where do opportunities for re-branding specific products exist? Is there a better

way to organize the chart with respect to the organization’s long-term strategy, including any future brand acquisitions?

For IES this meant establishing an overarching corporate entity with subordinate companies organized by primary sales channels. Innovative Ergonomic Solutions made sense as the umbrella entity because “ergonomic workspace solutions” is the common thread between each subsidiary brand, regardless of sales channel. And the new IES brand, while not a consumer-facing brand, provides a common identity for corporate shared services, like operations, finance, marketing, and customer service.

Building on HAT Contract, the contract office brand with the strongest name recognition, two companies were consolidated under a common name — HAT Collective — that also absorbed the relevant product lines from CompuCaddy and Innovative Office Products. This greatly simplified their brand structure and provided a template for future acquisitions in the contract market.

Now IES could focus on its Original Equipment Manufacturer (OEM) and Point-of-Sale (POS) business. This company was re-branded Innovative Design Works (IDW), a stronger name positioning for a refined strategy of designing, engineering, and manufacturing products as a contract office OEM supplier and direct seller in the POS market.

CompuCaddy had a strong direct-to-business sales model, primarily in healthcare. However, the brand had little name recognition. IES folded its direct-to-business sales under the IDW name and organization, while phasing out the CompuCaddy brand and further simplifying the IES brand structure. The CompuCaddy products were absorbed into a healthcare vertical within HAT Collective.

Another brand (Ergotech) primar-

ily sells through distribution partners, which can be perceived as competition with contract office dealers. So it made sense to keep Ergotech separate from HAT Collective, both in product lines and marketing. The Ergotech brand was given a brand refresh and direction to continue servicing the distribution channel.

Articulate new brand strategy/strategies: With a long-term strategy in place, and a sustainable hierarchy of brands to build upon, it’s time to refine specific brand strategies.

What are the unique attributes and customer perceptions that each brand offers? What’s the most effective strategy for leveraging these positive attributes and perceptions, while elevating each brand’s position? Tackling these essential questions will require a ground-up approach to refining the verbal and visual expression of each brand.

For IES to establish its new brand, HAT Collective, multiple companies and product lines were merged into one. Each brought unique attributes and customer perceptions. This new entity needed to leverage those positive attributes and perceptions but with a new, elevated aesthetic. This required a ground-up approach to verbal and visual expression.

The first step was to articulate the mission of HAT Collective — “empowering people to work their way” — then develop their story based on the brand’s mission to improve employee health, satisfaction, productivity, and engagement through a sophisticated and flexible range of workplace solutions. From this foundation, the HAT Collective visual and verbal voice were created.

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