



Creative Outdoor Space Design for Combatting COVID-19

Industry Topic Specialist

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Specialist Highlights

Canoe & Paddle (C&P) was able to react quickly to capitalize on opportunities during the early stages of COVID-19 for a number of reasons:

- Believed in the importance of evolving, doing the best with the resources available to them at the time and working to continuously improve.
- Ensured their investments met three criteria (ACE):
 - A – attractive, created a great ambiance
 - C – customer focused, comfort in all conditions
 - E – excellence, did everything to the best of their ability
- Built relationships with everyone and kept them in the loop
- Able to be flexible and nimble – ready with multiple plans so that once direction was provided, they were able to move immediately.
- Didn't worry about the perfect plan and creating exactly what was envisioned. Allowed plans to evolve (customer didn't know what the original vision was).
- Didn't overthink things – ran with it and gave it a go.

Discussion Ideas & Tips

COVID-19 has inspired many businesses to creatively adapt their outdoor spaces in order to drive new business as a result of the pandemic. This summary highlights the approaches, insights and ideas from 18 Ontario based tourism operators/professionals.

"You have to have a vision. Don't worry if the end result doesn't look exactly as you envisioned it; the customer has no idea."

– Gillian Exton

Tactical Practical Take-Aways

- Build plans based on today's regulations but build alternates that address different future scenarios. Not a multi-page document but something succinct, a drawing or statement that outlines what you want to do, what it looks like, why it is important and how it will be done.
- Things need not be expensive or big. Start small and build, don't overstretch financially. Think about investing in actions instead of expensive infrastructure.
- Include your tribe (customers) on your journey – talk with them and find out what they want and need.
- Identify and develop community relationships with people who are important to the business. These include municipal/township planners, local politicians, local suppliers, media contacts, etc.
- Buy local. Invest in local suppliers and they are likely to return the favour. Perhaps there is a win-win opportunity to barter for supplies/labour.
- Invest in the community as the Stuff Store did with their light tree. While not directly connected to the business, it supported the community – which in the end supported the business. There is no need to be in competition with those around you. Complement and build the destination together.
- Manage risk and invest for the long term. Think about the changes being made as trials of new/extended guest offers, not one-off short-term solutions. Identify and collect metrics that can help you decide/make the case to continue with the new innovations.
- Communicate success. Capture and share success stories – with guests, funders, suppliers, partners and influencers (i.e., local politicians) – they show resiliency and the ability to adapt and grow.

Ideas shared at this session

A variety of creative solutions to address space constraints and make visitors feel comfortable inside and outside were discussed:

- Create foliage ‘walls’ a greener and prettier way than Plexiglas to separate tables/seating.
- Businesses that have an outdoor area are making changes to help people feel more comfortable outside and even creating new outdoor experiences
 - Building more paths on the property for visitors to use.
 - Providing fire pits and tabletop campfires for outdoor experiences. Given the shortage of mini campfire kits, alternatives identified for food related experiences included fondue pots, raclette grills. Maybe offer a variety of food experience stations that people can book.
 - In addition to providing chairs and blankets, allow guests to ‘Bring Their Own’.
 - Domes and even old ski gondolas as dining pods.
- Furnace Falls Farm used staff as runners to gather items from the greenhouse rather than letting customers in
- Fish Tales Bar & Grill in Ocean City, Maryland used "bumper tables" that are surrounded by large inner tubes to keep diners from getting too close.
- When creating a new space, consider naming it as C&P did with their “Lovers Lane” area – this created cache for an out of the way narrow section of the patio that could only hold a few 2-person tables.

Partnering was seen as another creative possibility to addressing space issues:

- Thousand Islands Playhouse in Gananoque could not fit everyone on the dock for their traditional Music on the Dock program and created Music on the Block, a series of musical events that took place throughout the town.
- This past summer Comedy Country partnered with Cabin Fever Kayak such that attendees of the festival could canoe in to watch the show from the water.
- Businesses that need space may be able to find another business that has space to rent – both business win as one need not make a major investment in infrastructure and the other receives a rental fee.

COVID-19 has resulted in businesses providing more outdoor experiences throughout the year. Furthermore, consumers are enjoying doing activities outside they have traditionally done indoors, suggesting resources spent to design and deliver such activities a worthwhile investment.

Ideas shared at previous sessions included

- Municipalities have been changing streetscapes by closing off smaller streets that come into main/commercial streets in order to create outdoor gathering spaces with planters and distanced tables and chairs. Such spaces often have local business sponsors who will maintain the space but they are not ‘owned’ by the business.
- Add fire pits to the grounds as a way for small pods of customers to stay warm while gathering outside. The City of Calgary’s winter fire pits program, was so popular when it first launched the city has decided to add 70 more fire pits to the 33 it started with. Resorts have also found the fire pits to offer a way to help small groups socially distance throughout their property. They can also be used to sell outdoor food experiences such as packaged picnics.
- Elmhirt’s Resort redefined their small group wedding experience as a result of COVID-19 protocols. Dancing and after parties are no longer permitted, so they created smore’s kits as an alternative social closure to the evening. Guests head out to the fire pit to make their smore’s before heading in for the night.
- Sweden’s Edible Country offer do-it-yourself fine-dining through an interesting collaboration with four Michelin-starred chefs, to create inspirational menus featuring local produce that can be foraged to help you experience the Swedish pantry. Book a table, head outdoors, find your food and cook it up.
- Elmirst’s Resort created an outdoor adventure Escape the Maze for the family, fashioned after “The Amazing Race”. It was so successful they intend to continue offering it.

“Non-price factors have become more important to customers. The industry needs to cover other terrain before “demand stimulating” its way out of the crisis, and instead restore traveler confidence. Customers need to be comfortable with all the touchpoints in their journey, so the travel industry is only as strong as its weakest link.”

The Travel Industry Turned Upside Down,
Report from Skift Research and McKinsey & Company

- The municipality of Port Hope is exploring new ways to present outdoor spaces for smaller experiences. In 2020, they involved the business community to create an outdoor gallery using the store windows to hold the art. The result, an outdoor gallery experience and people were often drawn into the business. Future evolutions include the possibility of adding QR codes to engage more senses such as music to enhance the experience of viewing the art and the voice of an artist sharing their story.
- Extend the time related to a season/occasion. Given restrictions in numbers and fear of crowds, people are looking for different ways and even times to celebrate. Consider ways to extend Valentines Day, Easter, Mother's/Father's Day from days to weeks in order to capitalize on people's desire to celebrate in a safe (non-crowded) manner.
- Make the guest space fully self-sufficient. Beachwood Resort added ladders to the docks in front of each of their cabins so that it was easier for guests to remain in their pod and swim (and get out of the water) at their dock rather than swim from a common swimming area.

Additional Helpful Links

The Globe & Mail: [Fire pits are this winter's hottest accessory as outdoor living becomes a pandemic lifestyle](#)

Trendwatching Innovation of the Day: [Dutch restaurant Bij de Tuinman launches socially distanced neighborhood dining](#)

Richard Louv blog post: [What is Nature-Deficit Disorder?](#)

Ontario Government's COVID-19 [Small Business Recovery Resources](#)

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