Banff Refreshing: CAN$22.8 Million Renovation Project
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NEED/OPPORTUNITY / The Town of Banff is a major Canadian tourist destination; four million visitors annually descend upon this small town with a population just over 8,000. During the summer months, Banff is a mecca for hikers and nature lovers. In addition to these rugged outdoor activities, Banff offers great shopping, dining and cultural activities year-round. For Banff, tourism is an economic driver, yet the town was faced with aging infrastructure (water lines over 100 years old) and a streetscape that couldn’t compete with other world-class mountain tourist destinations such as Aspen, Vail or Whistler.

After going through extensive public consultation throughout 2005 and 2006, the town announced plans to make major infrastructure improvements to a two block area of the downtown core known as Banff Avenue—the heart of the community’s shopping and tourism district. In 2005, with the help of DDB Canada, the team branded the project Banff Refreshing in an effort to demonstrate commitment to positioning the project as an attraction. The team worked diligently throughout 2006 to engage tourism operators and businesses in the development of the plan and to keep visitation steady during this time. The CAN$22.8 million project would involve tearing up the main traffic artery to replace a 100-year-old underground infrastructure that was at risk of a major failure and significant streetscape enhancements that would add wider sidewalks, more crosswalks, twice as many places to sit, landscaping beds and all new lighting. The result would be a new downtown core that better reflects the natural environment, provides more space for tourists and residents to enjoy, and updates the infrastructure needed to withstand the pressure of seasonal tourism demands. But this major construction project would mean that downtown Banff would be torn up—from March through September—during the height of tourism season.

In early 2007, Banff’s Town Council heard from businesses along Banff Avenue that were concerned about the effects of construction. Businesses rallied together and asked the Council not to do the essential infrastructure work—preferring to risk a catastrophic failure to a plan that would close the street during summer. Businesses worried the project would force them into bankruptcy as their summer earnings finance their year. With six-foot high construction fencing lining the streets, access to stores (which would be open throughout construction) would be hindered and signage would be blocked. To minimize the impact of construction on businesses, the Council approved a budget to enhance the visitors’ downtown experience despite construction. They challenged the administration to create a festival-like atmosphere in an effort to keep visitors in the downtown core where business could be preserved. Businesses overwhelmingly supported this new approach.

Residents, supportive of the project moving forward, were concerned about the impact construction would have on their everyday activities in the town. Marketing and communications developed a communication plan to address resident concerns and construction impacts in advance of the project’s approval, and worked with DDB Canada (beginning in January 2007) to develop a marketing strategy that would mitigate business issues in the downtown core.
INTENDED AUDIENCES /

- A total of 8,352 residents: The town of Banff’s primary purpose is as a service centre for visitors; residents understand and are committed to this overarching mandate. Residents trust the town as the primary source of information on municipal initiatives and issues, and demand a high quality of life (2007 Resident Satisfaction Survey).

- Owners and managers of the 172 shops and service outlets located in the 100 and 200 blocks of Banff Avenue: This group feared a major loss of business, yet supported the town’s additional investment to create a festival-like atmosphere in the downtown core as a means of mitigating construction impacts.

- Seasonal frontline workers in the 172 shops and services: This group moves to town in late spring and typically has little awareness of town initiatives. That said, the visitors’ expectation is that these “locals” know what’s going on in the community, so the team identified them as a key audience to share good news about Banff Refreshing.

- In-destination visitors: Approximately 20,000–40,000 new guests arrive each day, including long haul independent travelers (international and national), travelers on tours and regional visitors (from Alberta). In summer, guests are in town to enjoy the local hotels, shops and restaurants. Visitors expect this to be an authentic and pristine mountain town (2004 Parks Visitor Study, Parks Canada).

- Potential regional visitors (from the City of Calgary, 1.5 hours away) who come to Banff as day-trippers in the summer (they can contribute up to 70 percent of visitor spending during summer): The team was concerned that any bad news about construction (i.e., noise, parking issues, traffic congestion around the core, etc.) would impact their decision to bring family and guests to Banff.

- Town of Banff staff: 150 employees (including 50 operations workers who are out and about in the community daily) serving the community as ambassadors of municipal information. Town staff often provide tourists with information as they go about their day and are an important conduit for the dissemination of neighborhood information.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES / COMMUNICATION GOALS

- Maintain resident, business and stakeholder buy-in for Banff Refreshing.

- Employees, residents, businesses, and stakeholders have an excellent understanding of construction impacts, mitigation strategies and contingency plans.

- Visitors understand that construction is underway in Banff, and know how to have a great visitor experience regardless of construction in the downtown core.
MARKETING GOALS (AIMED AT THE VISITOR AUDIENCE ONLY)

- Encourage visitors to come downtown.
- Help them enjoy their time downtown.
- Help them move easily through the entire construction area.
- Ensure their visit is so positive they want to return to Banff once it is “refreshed.”

OBJECTIVES

- Employees, residents, business and community stakeholders have a strong awareness/understanding of Banff Refreshing construction plans and impacts.
- The target audience believes the town is doing a good or great job of managing Banff Refreshing.
- Residents believe the town is doing a good or great job of keeping the community informed of progress on Banff Refreshing.
- Visitors say they had a great visitor experience during Banff Refreshing.
- Visitors say they will recommend Banff as a place to visit.

SOLUTION OVERVIEW / Internally, the team developed a three-phase communication plan to maintain community buy-in for Banff Refreshing, keep primary audiences in the loop on construction progress, and ensure proper signage was in place to help profile businesses and aid visitors in finding parking in the downtown core. In January 2007, the town engaged DDB Canada to enhance its plans by adding a marketing strategy aimed at responding to business concerns raised just two months prior to construction kick-off. The team supplemented this plan’s implementation with additional tactics executed by town staff in an effort to keep costs in line with the budget. The following are just a few of the highlights implemented prior to and during Banff Refreshing:

- A business liaison was added as a single point of contact for businesses, seven days a week, 24 hours a day. Businesses relied on this position heavily to resolve daily issues that could have had a negative impact on business.

- Weekly face-to-face communication updates were provided; these meetings were attended by “block captains” who were nominated by all businesses within each block. Block captains then distributed verbal and written information (provided by the town) to their network. The team also maintained an e-mail distribution list.

- A Banff Refreshing communication network (that included community stakeholders like Banff Lake Louise Tourism, the Small Business Association, the Hotel Motel Association, Parks Canada
and tour groups) was established to seek regular input and distributed weekly communication updates to stakeholders, who then passed information on to their networks.

- Regular Banff Refreshing updates were added to www.banff.ca (up to 50,000 page views a week).
- An internal launch event was held to update staff on all of the elements of Banff Refreshing, and was followed up with regular updates through weekly e-letters and face-to-face presentations at department meetings. The team also provided the “Employee’s Guide” to Banff Refreshing that included key messages and contact information for all project members.
- Updates were provided at each public Town of Banff Council meeting. Bow Valley journalists then wrote biweekly editorial updates for their newspapers.
- Proactive media relations activities were initiated to mitigate negative coverage about construction (that could impact tourism) and promote Banff Refreshing as a must-see attraction.
- Weekly updates were made available via the public information page in the Banff Crag & Canyon (residents list this as their primary source for information about town programs with 95.9 percent regular readership, 2007 Resident Community Satisfaction Survey).
- All frontline workers were invited to a Banff Refreshing party at Wild Bill’s Saloon. Over 300 workers (100 over target) joined the team for a briefing. They received sweatbands and wristbands to keep them fresh, as well as a wallet-sized project cheat-sheet on refreshing and were quizzed on the answers.
- The team partnered with local businesses to host residents and stakeholders for a “thank you for your patience party” immediately following project completion for 2007. The venue was at capacity with over 400 guests.

To create a festival-like atmosphere:
- The team wrapped 450 meters of construction fencing in bold and colourful scrim that reinforced the main message: “enjoy as we refresh our surroundings.” Rather than apologize for construction, they wanted to celebrate its result.
- Four welcome stands were placed in the Banff Refreshing zone to respond to any questions about the project.
- To staff the welcome stands, the team employed 13 ambassadors who received customer service and tourism-related training. This program was so successful that Banff Lake Louise Tourism will add welcome stands as a permanent means to connect with guests at street level.
- The team introduced the squirrel guides—Herman, Gillroy, Penelope, Abigail, Rochelle and Peter—who greeted guests and guided visitors through the construction area. Each squirrel represented one of the five types of squirrels found in Banff National Park (so that the team could take an opportunity to educate visitors about the park). Thirty of the three-foot-high squirrels were used to create intrigue around the Banff Refreshing zone. They also created a huge community
buzz. Squirrels were taken hostage by a neighbouring community at fund-raising events and stolen out of tree tops (and returned begrudgingly), making frontpage news on more than one occasion.

- The team created a “Guide to Banff Refreshing” to deliver key messages on the project, introduce the squirrel guides and profile Refreshing specials offered by Banff businesses. The team successfully negotiated with Parks Canada to have the guide distributed through their Park Gate—something they have never supported before. To thank already busy gate staff, the team gave them custom-designed, special edition “to-go” coffee mugs. This small gesture went a long way.

- Visitors were encouraged to gather a set of their very own Banff Refreshing collectible buttons featuring each of the squirrel guides (a gift with purchase available at over 60 businesses in downtown Banff). One million were given away over the summer. Ten thousand Ultimate Squirrel Guide Collection Cards were also given out. There have been many online requests from international button collectors, and buttons have since been sighted on backpacks and purses around the world.

- The team ran a street performers program with entertainers from around the world who kept guests laughing every day from mid-May through September.

- Unique photo opportunities were found around the Banff Refreshing zone (people could pose raising a flag atop a mountain, putting a golf ball or carving the slopes). It was not uncommon to see people lined up to pose for their free, souvenir photograph on any given day.

- Tent cards were placed in every hotel room in an effort to profile the buttons and send guests downtown.

- Print ads were placed in two local visitors’ guides: Where Magazine and Visitor’s Choice. The team placed TV ads on Resort TV—the default channel that plays in all hotel rooms—and ran a range of spots on Park Radio, the station most listened to by visitors.

- The team ran a contest for a Refreshed spa weekend courtesy of the Fairmont Banff Springs and Willow Stream Spa (valued at CAN$2,500); the drawing was held the week of 3 December.

To manage way finding and parking challenges:

- The team established a parking and traffic team of 10 who managed congestion at peak times and helped guests find parking.

- The team added over 90 new way-finding signs to help visitors find their way around town and locate parking.

- The team created a customized sign for each business in Banff and attached it to the construction fencing to reinforce business locations since fencing impeded views.

- The team placed six shops and services finders (similar to mall maps) on the construction fencing in the downtown core—something Banff Lake Louise Tourism had been trying to do for years, but could never get community buy-in to actually get off the ground. Tourism is pleased to have this information and will use the maps again in 2008.
- One hundred thirty additional parking stalls were added to accommodate the 95 stalls removed from Banff Avenue.
- Squirrel tracks were painted on sidewalks leading from each parking area to the Banff Refreshing zone.

**IMPLEMENTATION AND CHALLENGES** Any construction project comes with challenges. Businesses and residents complained about too much dust, too much noise, and too many changes to the layout of the construction site as the contractor worked on roadways and sidewalks. The team responded to these issues daily, always with a focus on providing solutions (i.e., watering the site on hot days, adding signage to clearly redirect pedestrians to stores, moving performers to problem areas to promote business, etc.). They managed businesses’ expectations by putting a business liaison in place, so businesses didn’t have to work through the engineering project manager (who was talented, but struggled with the intensity of communication requirements as he was so focused on project management). Maintaining business support was the most critical challenge and, in the end, was the biggest success.

**TIME LINE TO PRODUCE CREATIVE ELEMENTS** Although the team developed their communication plan in 2005 and 2006 (they initially planned to launch Banff Refreshing in 2006). The decision to add a marketing strategy came about in January 2007. The launch of the construction project was set for the week of 19 March 2007, meaning the team had to have all major campaign elements in place by 18 March. DDB began working on the initial strategy 11 January 2007, leaving just nine weeks to develop theming, a visual identity, source suppliers, create copy and develop artwork, produce these items, and have them shipped to the semi-remote town. It’s also important to note that this strategy could not move forward without the support of the Banff business community, so this time line also included a creative concept presentation (attended by all businesses) just two weeks after the initial briefing. The team held two additional face-to-face meetings to ensure 100 percent support for the direction and execution of this plan. No aspect of the creative or production could be sacrificed due to deadlines. And nothing could be produced until the final sign-off from Banff businesses was received. The community wholeheartedly supported the program and, thanks to DDB, the team had all creative elements in place for the Banff Refreshing launch.

**LIMITED RESOURCES** Being a small municipality, the communication team consisted of two staff members. In addition to Banff Refreshing, the team still had to manage regular workload and provide consultation services to all departments in the town. To help with day-to-day requirements, a business liaison and ambassador coordinator were added to the team. To maximize budget, the team wrote and produced all communication materials, ads and events (beyond DDB’s marketing elements) in-house.
MEASUREMENT/EVALUATION / The team randomly selected visitors to complete short surveys throughout Banff Refreshing and posted a survey aimed at residents and businesses online through www.banff.ca. Responses were overwhelmingly positive:

- Eighty-six percent of residents, business, and stakeholders said they had a good or strong level of awareness of construction plans and impacts.
- A total of 84.3 percent of visitors, residents, businesses and stakeholders said the town did a good or great job of managing construction.
- Ninety-one percent of residents, businesses and stakeholders believed the town did a good or great job keeping them informed.
- The percentage of visitors who said they had a good, great or exceptional experience during Refreshing totaled 65.9 percent.
- A total of 96.2 percent of visitors said they would recommend Banff to others.
- The percentage of visitors who said they were able to find their way through the construction zone effectively was 86.1.
- Eighty-seven percent of visitors said their visit met their expectations.
- The percentage of visitors who said they plan to come back to Banff was 81.4.
- Employee focus groups showed staff had a strong awareness/understanding of construction plans and impacts.

ADDITIONAL OUTCOMES

- According to Parks Canada, visitation was slightly up (4 percent) in 2007.
- Although it was not a specific objective (it was a strategy in the communication plan that supported objectives), the team succeeded in securing only positive media coverage throughout the construction period (over 100 articles). The Banff community rallied to support the messaging and helped position Banff Refreshing as a positive step for Banff. This resulted in significant print, television and radio coverage touting Banff as a leader in managing major downtown construction and celebrating the countdown to a refreshed Banff Avenue.
- Since the launch of Banff Refreshing, the town has had inquiries from communities and organizations around the world (i.e., Kenora and Kitchener, Ontario; Okotoks, Alberta; Kelowna, British Columbia; The Calgary Stampede; Sedona, Arizona; Yuba City and Mary’s Ville, California; and Jerusalem, Israel) all wondering how the town was able to manage a major construction project in a downtown core with no negative publicity and such a positive visitor response.
- Alberta Construction Magazine named Banff Refreshing the winner of its top projects of the year in the civil category, largely as a result of the innovative marketing efforts.
Unisource Canada announced the “Guide to Banff Refreshing” as a winner in the “Corporate Brochures” category of their National Annual Report Competition.

Most significantly, the team is pleased to report that Banff businesses did very well throughout Banff Refreshing. Restaurants reported an increase in volume and, although retail results are proprietary, businesses reported they felt the marketing efforts positively impacted their business opportunities. No businesses closed, and the community thrived in the busy winter season.

BUDGET
The initial communication plan had a budget of CAN$160,000. The decision to create a festival-like atmosphere added CAN$1 million. The team finished the project roughly CAN$160,000 under budget.

It is worth pointing out that this type of budget is unprecedented for the municipality. For context, the annual advertising budget is just CAN$30,000 (the team does all writing and design in-house), yet there was overwhelming support to move forward with the plan. The total amount paid to contractor DDB was CAN$487,401.14. This covered four welcome stands, 450 metres of fence wrap, 500,000 guides, 30 squirrels, 1.3 million buttons (as well as cash register danglers to promote button collection), 10,000 collectible button cards, contest items, shop and services finders, and six photo opportunities. The team invested CAN$110,000 in street performance, CAN$240,000 in parking and traffic management, and approximately CAN$130,000 on the ambassador program. CAN$20,000 was invested in advertising, frontline communications (CAN$2,000), and thank-you presents and celebrations for contractors, town staff, residents, stakeholders and volunteer partners.