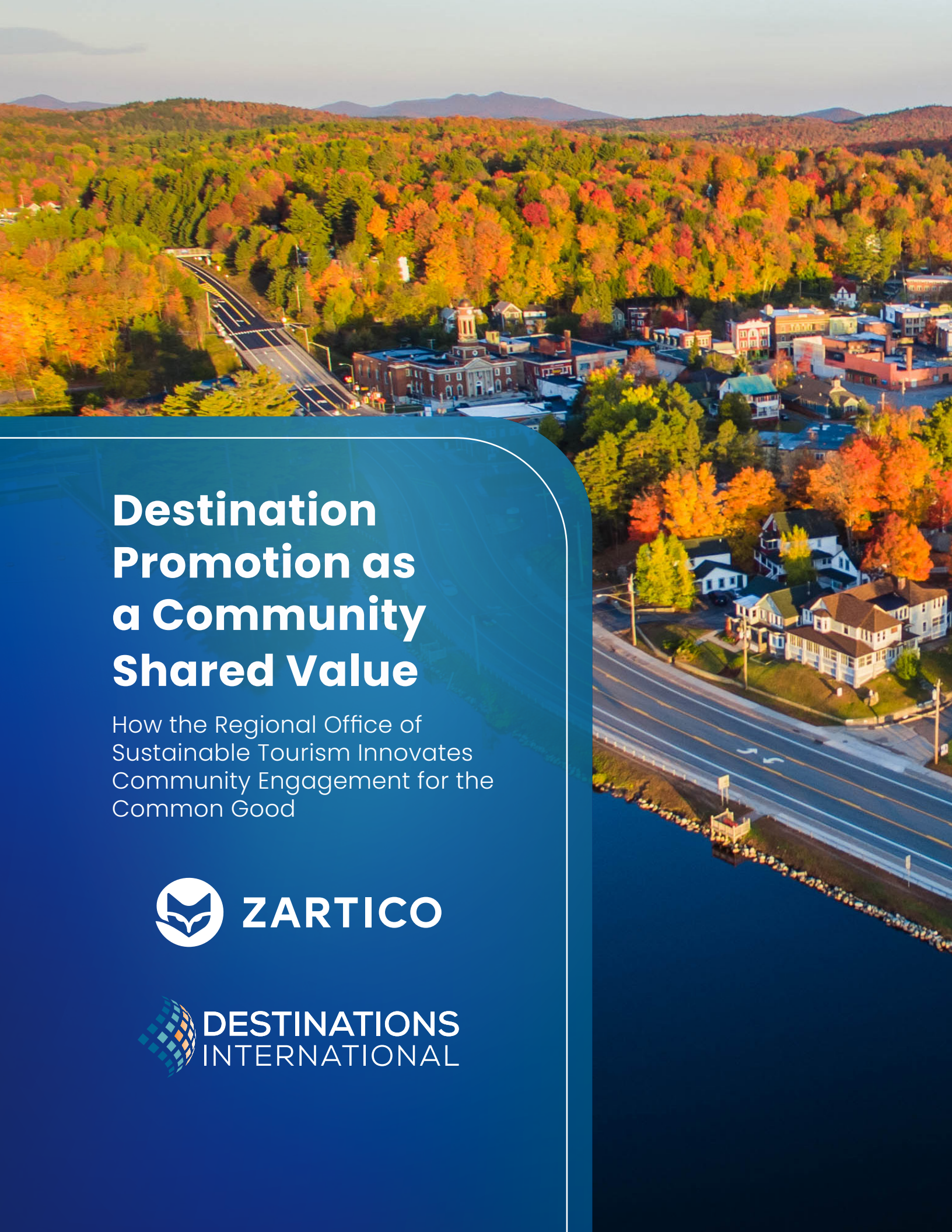




Destination Promotion as a Community Shared Value

How the Regional Office of
Sustainable Tourism Innovates
Community Engagement for the
Common Good



ZARTICO



**DESTINATIONS
INTERNATIONAL**

A crowd gathers on a wide trail flanked by bare trees and evergreens, a light dusting of early December snow beneath their feet. They are there to officially open the first 9.9-mile segment of the Adirondack Rail Trail between Lake Placid and Saranac Lake. Local business owners and public officials enthusiastically tell a North Country Public Radio reporter about the economic and tourism opportunities the year-round, multi-use trail will create.

The road to get here was a steep one — the ribbon-cutting marks the end of a yearslong debate over what to do with the old rail line running through the region. But at least one decision related to this project was easy, almost a no-brainer.

The bike racks at the Saranac Lake end of the trail sport a lively logo declaring the small town “Decidedly Different.” The logo and tagline were developed by the Regional Office of Sustainable Tourism (ROOST), but the brand itself belongs — quite decidedly — to the community.



Jasen Lawrence

Director of Digital Strategy,
ROOST

“We didn’t create it in a vacuum,” says ROOST Director of Digital Strategy Jasen Lawrence. “We had community meetings; we met with elected officials. It took almost a year from start to finish, and in the end there was a brand that the community itself embraced.

And we didn’t say, That’s ours. It’s not our branding — it’s the community’s, and they can use it however they want,” he says. “The people who were planning for the rail trail — without any prompting — said, *Hey, we want the Saranac Lake logo to be on the side of each bike rack. Is that something we can do? And we said, Absolutely. We’ll help you get that done.*”

Framing tourism promotion for the common good

Saranac Lake is one of seven separate tourism brands managed by ROOST, which serves as the destination organization for two-and-a-half counties situated in the Adirondacks of northeastern New York.

The region leans heavily on its outdoor recreation offerings. Vast wilderness and woodlands are punctuated by small towns and hamlets with rich local histories. Living up to its decades-long reputation as a convenient getaway for nature-lovers — the Adirondacks are within a day’s drive of 25% of the North American population — ROOST emphasizes year-round offerings ranging from snowmobiling to swimming holes.

The individual brands differentiate the variety of experiences. Websites for Saranac Lake and Lake Placid mix outdoor adventures with main street shops and restaurants, while the website for Hamilton County — the least densely populated county in the Eastern U.S. — lives out its slogan “Small Towns — Big Outdoors.”



When a community embraces the brand the way Saranac Lake has done, it's a sign to the hardworking team at ROOST that their efforts are having a positive impact.

But community pride is a metric that's difficult to measure in numbers. How do you report a return on investment when that return looks like an increased sense of belonging? And how does a destination tell the story of their efforts and impact to an audience unfamiliar with the industry-standard alphabet soup of ADR and RevPAR?

Through an extensive study, the advocacy team at Destinations International (DI) asked the question, "If we say tourism builds community, how do we prove it?"

They researched the potential to frame destination promotion as a community shared value — a common good no less vital to community health than clean drinking water or effective public education.

Like these common goods, destination promotion needs "a series of metrics or indicators that help inform the community of not only its purpose, but also how well the common good performed and how it benefited the community."

DI called on Zartico to develop a series of indicators and create ways for destinations across the globe to better measure and articulate their impact. By digging into the data and sharing the stories of destinations that are already tapping into these indicators, Zartico is leading the exploration of the first five indicators:

- The importance of the visitor economy
- Tax revenues
- Economic opportunities and jobs
- Community amenities and quality of place
- Quantifying the negative impacts of tourism



"Destination organizations must become one of their community's shared values in a way that explains the value of destination promotion and connects that value and the organization to the residents of the community."

– *Destinations International
Advocacy Team*



Innovative destination leadership in the heart of the Adirondacks

Over the past eight years, ROOST has made an intentional shift to expand the traditional destination marketing structure and fully embrace operations as a destination marketing and management organization (DMMO).

The organization's unconventional configuration — they represent more than two dozen towns and villages across a region roughly the size of Massachusetts — allows them to pool resources and extend their promotional reach much further than any one of the mostly small, rural towns would be able to accomplish alone.

The staff of 33 operates as a full-service in-house agency with multiple web developers, content writers, and designers to not only support their seven tourism brands but also to provide a quick turnaround when one of their stakeholders needs an event flier or last-minute public notice.

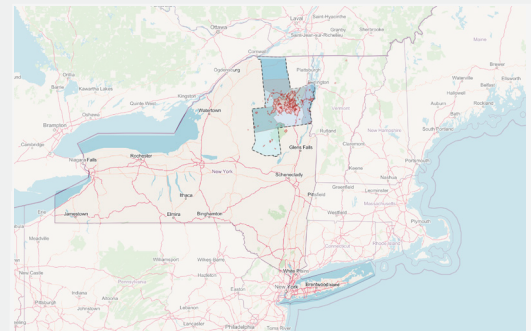


The team has developed creative ways to engage with stakeholders scattered across a broad geography. As a result, they've innovated some of the very efforts that point to ROOST's role as a community shared value, including:

- Direct engagement with residents and businesses through regional managers and sentiment surveys
- Sharing the "secret sauce" of data-led strategy through insight-packed stakeholder reports
- Celebrating the reinvestment of tax revenue through quality-of-place-building grants
- Supporting growing economic vibrancy through branding and long-range vision
- Soliciting candid feedback, then developing creative responses to negative impacts like crowding



By the Numbers



\$5.2 million
annual budget

33
full-time staff
members

95%
of Essex County
occupancy tax revenue
goes to ROOST



Show — and tell — the impact of the visitor economy

Jasen estimates that in some areas upwards of 70% of the regional economy is driven by tourism. The importance of the visitor economy is evident in towns like Lake Placid, which manages to sustain more than 90 restaurants, despite a year-round population of only 2,300 people.

Most people get it, Jasen says, though he acknowledges there will always be a handful of dissenters.

For ROOST, a vital element of communicating the significance of tourism is remaining visible, even when destination offices are 50 or more miles away from the towns they promote. To get “boots on the ground,” the organization created regional managers — ambassadors in each community who keep the feedback loop going.

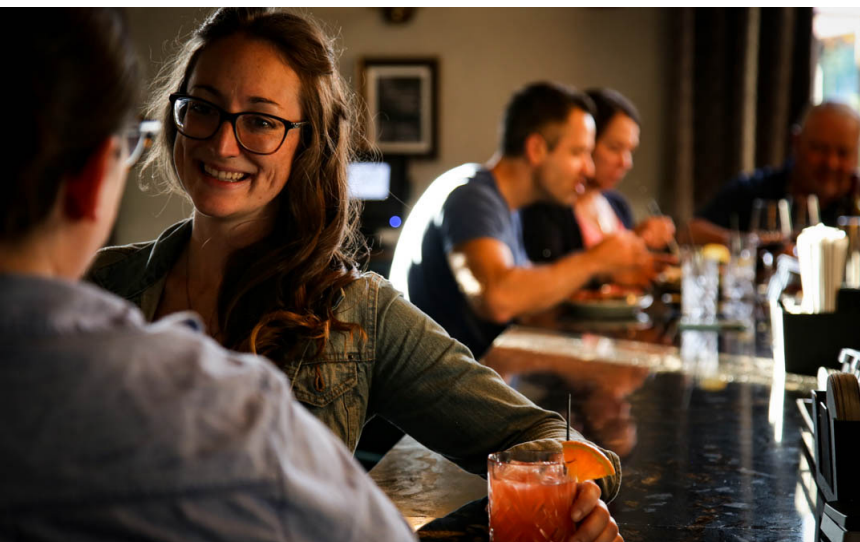
ROOST recently introduced annual sentiment surveys to take the pulse of residents and local business owners. The results are mostly positive — 84% of respondents in 2023 felt tourism has a positive impact on local businesses — and they appear to be improving over time. But the survey findings also surface some of the same concerns that DI found.

Click to open video.



How ROOST stays in touch with the community

ROOST's regional managers maintain a daily presence in each of the communities the organization promotes. They connect with stakeholders and attend community meetings, looking for opportunities to facilitate growth and vibrancy within the visitor economy.



On average, 33% of spending in regional restaurants is contributed by visitors. In peak seasons, visitors contribute more than 60% of restaurant spending.

(Source: Zartico Spending Data)

“A lot of the community does see the positive impacts of tourism,” says ROOST Data Analyst Layne Dowdall. “But there may be some growth needed toward understanding how occupancy tax works, and the impact it has on them if occupancy grows.”

In response, ROOST has dialed up the positive press, putting out releases about promotion successes and highlighting a new local development fund. They also look closely at survey responses to questions about when during the year businesses might benefit from increased visitation. These findings help the organization align efforts with community needs.



Layne Dowdall
Data Analyst, ROOST

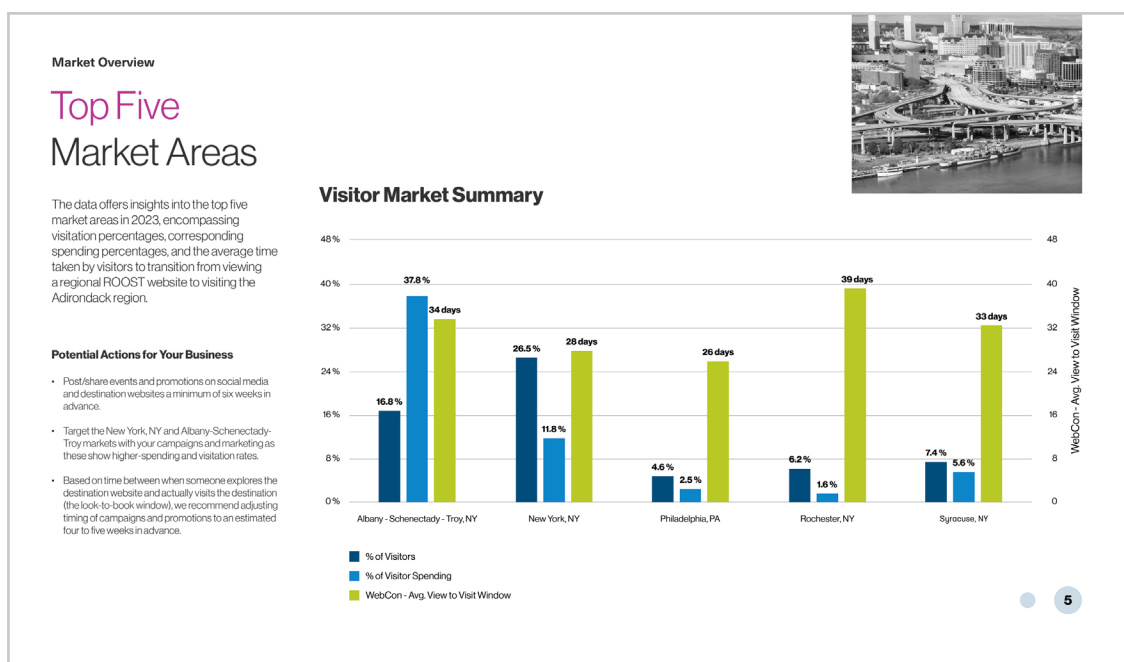
Serve up date with a side of expert recommendations

Jasen’s research team is prolific, conducting several studies each year, many of which drill down into individual destination segments.

Their approach goes beyond pointing to a big number or upward trend and calling it a win. Instead, they put themselves in the shoes of their stakeholders and consider how sharing data might invite the community to share in their strategic vision.

The team recently distributed an annual report based on the geolocation and visitor spending insights they receive from Zartico. The detailed document includes helpful pointers for interpreting the data and calls out specific recommended actions that business owners can take based on the findings.

“When we sent it out, we looked at the data we use internally for planning our campaigns,” Layne says, “and then we thought, how can our businesses and our communities use this as well?”



Click to open video.



What can stakeholders do with our data?

To create ROOST's stakeholder reports, the research team sifted through all the available data points to choose the ones that their audience would be most likely to put into action.

Connect the dots from tax revenues to community amenities

In 2020, local officials in Essex County raised the occupancy tax from 3% to 5% and earmarked the additional funds for what would become the Community Tourism Enhancement Fund.

Over the past four years, this annual pool of about \$2 million has gone back into each of the county's communities to be invested in development projects.

"The only catch is it has to be something that benefits both tourism and residents," Jasen says. "It's been a wildly successful program. And when you can say tourism dollars literally built this new warming hut at your skating rink, that goes a long way toward those communities wrapping their heads about how important that is."

"It's a hard thing when you say, You know tourism lowered your taxes by \$2,000 last year. Isn't that great?" he continues, adding that this message often falls flat, especially when factors like inflation make everything seem expensive. "So just to see a physical thing built in their community that their kids can sit in and enjoy, that's had a huge impact."



Tourism dollars at work

The projects funded by the enhancement fund have run the gamut from improved signage to financing a new ambulance to supporting the Adirondack Rail Trail.

- Here are a few of the ways tourism dollars have been reinvested into community quality of place:
- Construction of bus shelters
- Three-week outdoor summer arts festival
- Playground equipment for a local elementary school
- Expanding the historical society's oral history program
- Improving trail access
- Affordable housing development
- Winter decorations for Main Street

Foster economic opportunity with branding and workforce development

Individualized branding is one way ROOST ensures their tourism promotion efforts align with the communities they represent — and the experiences visitors will have when they visit.

Strong, differentiated place brands allow local businesses to capitalize on destination awareness by developing their own unique products and services that fulfill the brand promise. That communities like Saranac Lake have embraced these brands as part of their identities speaks to the power of this form of marketing support.

From a management perspective, destinations like the Adirondacks face a common obstacle to growing economic opportunity: seasonality.

Seasonality is often a self-driving scenario. Businesses don't see enough revenue in the low season, so they close down. Then visitors aren't interested in those seasons because so few businesses are open.

The team is taking an incremental approach. Instead of pushing businesses to remain open all winter, they strategically schedule events and visitor-focused activities about one week after typical closure dates.

Jasen estimates that in the past, the region has seen about 70% of its visitation during the summer months and about 30% in the winter. Today, data revealed through Zartico and visitation surveys shows a balance closer to 60/40.

At the same time, ROOST is encouraging communities to develop more indoor and weatherproof attractions. The push is designed to combat the effects of climate change — the region just experienced the hottest winter on record. It also supports in the effort to level-load visitation across all 12 months of the year, creating more stable, year-round jobs and economic opportunities for residents.

[Click to open video.](#)



Different brands for different experiences

Maintaining seven distinct brands requires a lot of work — the team includes four full-time web developers and four content writers. But it's effective in connecting visitors with the Adirondack experience they're looking for.





Find opportunities amid friction

The Adirondacks — like any desirable location — experience the negative effects of tourism alongside the benefits.

Located a half day's drive from New York City, the region saw an explosion of activity during the COVID pandemic as city-dwellers searched out safe, outdoor destinations.

One of the communities that serves as a primary hiking hub for the High Peaks watched as trailhead parking overflowed and lines of parked cars stretched for miles alongside roadways. It was a safety hazard, and the community reached out to ROOST to find a solution.

The team launched a campaign to redirect the flow of visitors, recommending other High Peaks trailheads and hikes in other parts of the region.

"We actually were a little too successful in that, believe it or not, and the next year the hiking numbers were too low," Jasen recalls. "We had to dial that messaging back ever so slightly and find a balance."

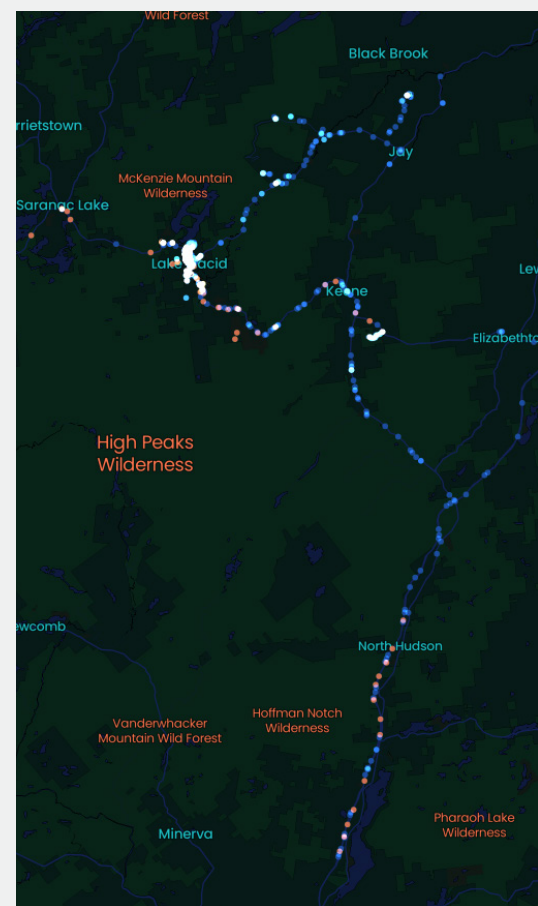
The ability to remain nimble and responsive to local feedback has helped ROOST address the negative feedback that came with an otherwise positive destination event: the Ironman race.

The second-oldest Ironman held in North America, the race brings athletes and their families and friends to Lake Placid each summer, no matter the weather. But for residents living along the race route, it wasn't always a reason to celebrate.

In response to complaints, ROOST and local leaders negotiated some changes to the Ironman contract. They developed a spectator code of conduct to discourage friends and family from setting up camp on private lawns.

They launched an Ironman hotline, staffed by a community liaison whose sole job is to address resident concerns in real time. Residents whose access to town is cut off by road closures can call a different number to request a safe escort in and out of their neighborhoods.

These creative, collaborative responses to the negative side effects of tourism further build community trust in ROOST and demonstrate that the organization truly has residents' needs at heart.



The Lake Placid Ironman begins at 6:30 a.m. with a 2.4-mile swim across Mirror Lake, followed by a 112-mile bike ride and a full marathon winding through the mountains. This dynamic visualization — powered by geolocation data — illustrates visitor and resident activity around Mirror Lake and the surrounding areas.

Is your destination telling the whole story?

ROOST's approach to destination promotion tells a complete and compelling story of community value, going beyond stats and KPIs to illustrate the broader ROI of destination marketing and management.

In its initial study, Destinations International identified the need for destination organizations to articulate value using both left-brain (logical, statistical, quantitative) and right-brain (emotional, personal, qualitative) metrics.

ROOST's activities embody this philosophy as they join data reporting with face-to-face advocacy, use both press releases and reinvestment funds to publicize the impact of tax revenues, and take action based on negative resident feedback.

In the coming months, DI and Zartico will announce a new way for destinations across the globe to understand how they are engaging with these critical areas of community value. This destination promotion community index will invite destination organizations to score their own performance and compare it with others.

Be on the lookout for announcements, as well as more stories shining a light on the communities putting these ideals into action.

This report was written by Cat Kessler, Content Director at Zartico.



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