

Recommended Strategies

Study Summary and Strategic Direction

The most salient points to emerge from the 2007 travel and tourism research for Currituck County includes:

- Although the Currituck County Department of Travel and Tourism program is new (began in 2005) it has achieved outstanding success in generating inquiries and interest. It is also clear that the CCDTT drives the first-time visit and that approximately half of all visitors will return to Currituck County. Those returning do not necessarily come through the CCDTT program and are more likely to make contact directly with the rental companies. Thus the continued partnership between the CCDTT and the rental companies is critically important.
- Leisure tourism makes up the vast majority (approximately 95%) of travel to Currituck County. There is also a small amount of corporate/commercial/business travel. It is a family leisure destination where visitors appreciate the laid-back, scenic, serene Carolina Coast beaches. It is not as commercial as Nags Head, Manteo and other Outer Banks sites. It is a slower pace, quiet beach setting where time-impooverished families can reconnect and relax together.
- There are approximately 3,200 lodging units (95% are rental houses – there are approximately 200 hotel/motel rooms) in Currituck County. The later spring and summer seasons are the peak, earning approximately 30% of the total annual revenues. The remaining 70% of the revenues are spread out over the shoulder and off-season periods.
- Point of origin for visitors is Virginia, the Mid-Atlantic and the east coast primarily, with Ohio and the Mid-West and southern U.S. making up the remainder. Approximately 90% of the visitors to Currituck County drive to the destination.
- The average trip length is 3.97 nights. The average trip expenditure is \$1,521.
- Tax relief is the primary benefit to Currituck County residents from tourism. Currently the annual per-household tax relief is approximately \$1,504.
- It is now time to refine the organization for the long-term, track and grow visitor expenditures, and put into place solid strategies for the future. In addition, it is now time to refine the marketing efforts to support a long-term positioning that will sustain this economic engine. This especially includes protecting and preserving the unique aspects that make Currituck County distinct and desirable as a destination. Simply put, the “rocket” has been launched and it is now time to put into play strategies that will keep it aloft for the long term.

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Key Strategies:

RTM recommends the following key strategies for Currituck County:

1. **Acknowledge that the CCDTT has established a good initial foundation and the time is right for serious tourism strategic thinking.** The CCDTT has accomplished outstanding results for a new program and should be acknowledged for its success. RTM was impressed to see the level of support that community leaders have committed to the continued support of the local tourism industry. An accomplished tourism marketing agency, leadership and a willing community is a recipe for success. It should also be acknowledged that the time is right for serious future plans to be initiated that will sustain this economic engine long into the future for Currituck County.

2. **Tracking and growing the per-visitor expenditures and tax relief is the primary objective of the CCDTT.** Currituck County leaders need to clearly understand that it is growth in total *per-visitor expenditures* that creates success. They have measured lodging spending. But they have not mastered understanding the total spending and driving the most beneficial economic impact and tax relief for Currituck County residents. Visitors spend money and make a significant economic impact. "Tax relief" is created when visitors pay taxes and thus, relieve the local residents from generating that tax revenue. The current visitor generated tax relief is approximately **\$1,502 annually per household in Currituck County**. This is the frontier for continued growth and benefit to Currituck County.

Total Trip Spending for Rentals (Daily Expenditures x 3.97 nights)

<u>Spending Category</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>6% Occ. Tax</u>	<u>4.25% NC Tax</u>	<u>2.5% County Tax</u>
Lodging	\$835.49	\$50.13	\$35.51	\$20.89
Food/meals	\$265.99		\$11.30	\$6.65
Transportation, fuel, etc.	\$171.74		\$7.30	\$4.29
Shopping	\$131.07		\$5.57	\$3.28
Attractions/amusements	\$117.04		\$4.97	\$2.93
Average Trip Total	\$1,521.33	\$50.13	\$64.65	\$38.04

Another way to look at this is to extrapolate total trip expenses based on lodging occupancy:

- 3,200 Approximate number of total lodging units in Currituck County
- X 365 (days) Available lodging unit nights per year =
- 1,168,000 Total available unit nights - divided by 38% avg. annual occupancy =
- 443,840 Sold units - divided by 3.97 nights
- 111,798 Total trips to Currituck County
- X \$1,521.33 Total average trip expense =
- \$170,081,651 Total visitor revenues generated in Currituck County

- \$835.49 total lodging per trip x 111,798 sold trips = \$93,406,111.02 x .06% occupancy tax = \$5,604,366

Recommended Strategies

It is sometimes surprising for community leaders to realize that there is such a huge amount of daily spending from visitors. Especially when one computes dining, shopping and transportation expenses, it is easier to see the bigger picture of economic impact that is generated by travel and tourism.

3. Establish a clear mission statement for the CCDTT:

RTM recommends: ***“Putting heads in beds and making cash registers ring.”***

4. Commit to sustaining for the long-term the unique distinctions that make Currituck County desirable to visitors. According to research, this includes:

- Beautiful, serene, non-commercialized, family-oriented Carolina coastal beaches (very distinct from all beaches north of Currituck County)
- Wild horses
- Currituck Lighthouse and historic village in Corolla

Simply put, the “personality” of Currituck County is the laid-back, serene, non-commercialized coastal and beach that is mentally pictured when one thinks the words “Carolina Coast”. Currituck is distinct from the other Outer Banks in that it is less congested, less commercialized, and more serene. It is the quieter, more remote family-beach part of the Outer Banks where wild horses can survive. It is the perfect personification of “Carolina Coast.” The leaders of Currituck County need to adopt this as a strategy that shapes actions in zoning, economic development, housing, transportation, and all other factors that serve to visually define Currituck County. ***This “Carolina Coast” personality is the essence that is Currituck County - it needs to be protected, preserved, and sustained for the long term.***

5. Establish effective gateways and visitor information center/sources for those traveling from the north. Currituck County, especially the mainland, is missing a huge opportunity in not providing visitor information near its northern border with Virginia. An effective gateway and visitor interpretive center is needed to create “a sense of place” for Currituck County and drive substantially increased expenditures on the mainland. This should be considered one of the top priorities.

6. Establish effective offices for CCDTT and grow professional capability and skill sets of staff

- Establish sufficient and efficient offices in northern portion of Currituck County
- Professional training recommended for staff to master tourism marketing skill sets

Recommended Strategies

7. Marketing priorities for CCDTT:

- Outsource fulfillment of inquiries
- Refine logo, images, and marketing messages based on top “attractors” and distinctions of Currituck County (Carolina coastal beaches, wild horses, lighthouse, family-oriented). Primary objective of marketing materials is to drive visitation and increase per-visitor expenditures.
- Continuously tracking expenditures, occupancy, and results
- Cooperative marketing with other Outer Banks destinations
- Priority marketing tools include:
 - Internet website (www.visitcurrituck.com)
 - Visitor guide
 - Advertising in State of North Carolina Internet website and state travel guide
 - Public relations efforts targeted at winning coverage of Currituck County distinctions in tourism media (newspapers, magazines, TV)
 - E-marketing, blogging and social media focused on the distinctions of Currituck County

8. Monitor satisfaction levels with tourism products in Currituck County. All ratings below a 4.0 are considered a failure.

Amenity	Inquiry Survey Average
Quality of beaches	4.36
Quality of the lodging	4.00
Overall appeal of the attractions in the area	4.00
Ease of finding visitor information	3.93
Lodging value you received for the price paid	3.82
Level of service/employee training	3.89
Signage and wayfinding	3.82
Variety of shopping & merchandise	3.69
Range of choices for dining	3.71

9. Understand the activities preferred by visitors:

Activities	Inquiry Survey
Dining out	86.75%
Shopping	81.93%
Driving/sightseeing	72.29%
Beach swimming	71.08%
Visit a historic site	53.01%
Sleep late/nap/rest	50.60%
Visit a park	39.76%
Looking for wild horses	37.35%
Birding/wildlife viewing	28.92%
Visit a museum	27.71%
Fishing/crabbing	25.30%
Biking	22.89%

Activities	Inquiry Survey
Antique shopping	21.69%
Boating	16.87%
Water sports	16.87%
4-wheel driving on beach	15.66%
Golf	14.46%
Attend a cultural performance	13.25%
Other (specify)	9.64%
Attend a festival	8.43%
Camping	7.23%
Business	6.02%
Visit a winery/vineyard	6.02%
Convention/meeting	2.41%

Recommended Strategies

10. Enhance existing products, attractions and activities to meet visitor expectations. Develop new products that fit the enhanced positioning.

- Enhance the visitor experience at the following:
 - More dynamic interpretation at Mackay Island National Wildlife Refuge
 - More interpretation at Currituck County Historic Jail and Courthouse
 - Better “packaging” as well as improved signage and promotion for the tourism components at Corolla Village.....better connection with Currituck Heritage Park, the lighthouse and Outer Banks Center for Wildlife Education
- New products that RTM recommends include:
 - A “Coastal Carolina” lifestyle commercial village on the mainland with lodging, shops, dining, entertainment
 - More dining options that feature “Coastal Carolina” unique foods
 - Merchandising of Currituck County tourism logo items including t-shirts and other garments, beach bags and a wide variety of other logo items. These should be sold in the visitor center as well as other retail outlets to continue building awareness of the distinctions of Currituck County.

11. Conduct on-going scientific research to monitor and track results.

- Monthly lodging survey
- Annual visitor profile, conversion and expenditure survey
- Annual evaluation of inquiry point-of-origin
- Monthly website user analysis
- Monthly inquiry database “data mining” and continued partnership with rental companies for development of repeat visitor database
 - Look for shoulder and off-season potentials
 - Encourage repeat visitation

Recommended Strategies

Following in this report are RTM’s recommendations, based on research, for implementation of this report. These recommendations are segmented by category:

- Positioning
- Gateways and Visitor Centers
- Wayfinding, Signage, and Traffic Management
- Marketing, Advertising and Public Relations
- Promotional Efforts
- Direct Sales Efforts
- Tourism Governance and Organizational Structure
- Offices and Staffing
- Funding
- Product Development
- Hospitality Training
- Local Education
- Additional and On-Going Research and Evaluation

Recommended Strategies

Positioning

Recommended Positioning Strategy

- Most popular activities:
 - Dining out
 - Shopping
 - Driving/sightseeing
 - Beach/swimming
 - Visit a historic site
 - Sleep late/nap/rest
 - Visit a park
 - Looking for wild horses
- Likes:
 - Beaches/ocean/scenery/natural beauty
 - Lighthouse
 - Relaxing/peaceful/serene
- Dislikes:
 - Traffic/crowds
 - Desire more dining options

Beaches are among the most compelling destinations for leisure travelers. At the same time, it is important to identify the unique distinctions a destination offers. As we've learned in this study, visitors see Currituck County as distinct from the other Outer Banks areas, and quite differently from other eastern coast destinations. Currituck is seen as the serenely beautiful, non-commercialized ideal family-oriented beach where wild horses roam and one finds a lighthouse and historic village. Marketing messages and materials should help potential visitors identify the "must sees" and those activities that are highly unique and perhaps can only be found in Currituck County in order to compel visitation.

The positioning statement Randall Travel Marketing recommends for increasing tourism in Currituck County:

Currituck Outer Banks, NC

***Coastal Carolina's serene beach, wild horses,
lighthouse, and historic village***

www.visitcurrituck.com

This wording would be used on the front of the visitor guide, in the Internet website, in advertising, and in all tourism marketing efforts and materials.

Further, RTM recommends that the logo be amended to have the icons reflect these unique distinctions, namely having a beach dune, a wild horse, a lighthouse, and something that portrays a historic village. It would be advisable to market test a variety of icons to see what images are most compelling for visitors to Currituck County.

Recommended Strategies

Gateways and Visitor Centers

It is important for visitors to know when they arrive in a destination, that they are welcome and where they should go to find information. Upon arrival in Currituck County, especially from the primary travel route at the north border of the County with Virginia, one should feel a sense of place and be able to quickly get a sense of what there is to see and do.

As mentioned elsewhere in this report, Currituck County needs a more substantial gateway at the North Carolina and Virginia state line.

It should also be noted that the concept for a new visitor center was tested in this research study with actual visitors as is seen below in the following charts:

When visiting an area, how often do you stop at the visitor center to get information on things to see and do?

	Mail Inquiry Survey
Never	2.29%
Rarely	18.63%
Fairly often	43.46%
Frequently	35.62%
No Response =	3.77%
Survey Sample (N) =	318
Question Sample (n) =	306

Would it be beneficial to have a visitor center at or near the state line of North Carolina and Virginia?

	Mail Inquiry Survey
Yes	89.26%
No	10.74%
No Response =	6.29%
Survey Sample (N) =	318
Question Sample (n) =	298

Over 76.32% of visitors to Currituck County stop at a visitor center either frequently or fairly often when visiting a destination. Further, a substantial 86.90% indicated that having a visitor center at or near the state line of North Carolina and Virginia would be beneficial. This reflects a clear and present need for additional visitor information for those entering Currituck County.

Recommended Strategies

1. In addition to the existing visitor center at Corolla, a Gateway Visitor Center is needed in northern Currituck County

- This center should include:
 - Architecture that portrays the personality of the area.
 - Strong curb appeal – it should look compelling to visit.
 - Allow travelers the opportunity to learn about Currituck County.
 - Encourage overnight visitation.
 - Showcase art/craft, dining, shopping, and entertainment.
- The staff for this center needs to be trained to proactively greet and engage those who enter. This is the “sales center” for visitors to Currituck County.
- There should be dramatic and dynamic visual displays, merchandise for sale, and “teasers” that will compel those who enter to want to find out more about the area.

RTM recommends any visitor center include the following elements:

- A convenient location that is easily accessible upon initial arrival in the destination.
- Highly visible signage. RTM recommends using the bright blue color that travelers have universally been trained to identify as the official visitor information center color.
- Open 7 days a week. The weekends are the most critical time to be open.
- Handicap accessibility. This is even more important with the aging Baby Boomer population.
- Lighted, exterior informational brochure racks to provide information when the center is closed. Make sure those who visit after hours can find cash registers.
- A clean, well-maintained exterior with curb appeal.
- Convenient parking, including motorcoach parking.
 - Readily available, accessible, clean restrooms.
 - The look of the exterior of the center must communicate this is a fun place to find great information. It must be irresistible.
 - A large help desk is actually a barrier between the staff and the visitor. It is so much more helpful to have smaller trip planning kiosks located in two or three locations throughout the center. This encourages planning and interaction rather than requiring visitors to approach a counter to request information. It also makes it much less likely that a visitor will be ignored upon entry into the center. Each kiosk should have highlighters, maps, brochures, and other trip planning tools readily available.
 - The “must-sees” need to be clearly and prominently promoted in this center. This can be accomplished with display panels and exciting visuals. One should have the feeling after entering that it is important to stay and see all these “must-sees” or plan a return visit
 - Brochure racks for specific attractions, lodging, etc. need to be conveniently located in order to encourage visitors to browse. Be sure the most visible racks focus on Currituck County. Again, the goal is to provide so many interesting things to see and do while overnighing in Currituck County, the decision to stay longer is compelled.

Recommended Strategies

1. (Continued)

- A board is needed for posting current festivals and events, weather, and ideal seasonal activities.
- Additional visual displays are needed to sell the dining and shopping in Currituck County. Make visitors drool with tempting photos of food and drink. Similarly for shopping, provide visuals that tempt.
- Information for directly offering lodging reservations is a requirement of a good visitor center. Provide direct dial access if possible. EVERY visitor needs to be asked if assistance can be provided in lodging reservations.
- Remember to capture e-mail addresses, zip codes, names, addresses and other contact information at every opportunity. A “Register for a Free Trip to Currituck County” box and sign is critically important.
- The visitor center needs to provide a great introduction and serve as a teaser to compel visitors to want to know more about the area. It should be clearly understood by the staff that the entire goal of this visitor center is to compel longer stays and greater expenditures in Currituck County. **It is a showcase and sales center.**
- Include technological conveniences such as Internet access, a television with weather monitoring, and fun technology such as blogging opportunities, e-postcards, etc.

Recommended Strategies

Wayfinding, Signage, and Traffic Management

Wayfinding and traffic are among the most frequent complaints RTM documents in numerous tourism research studies. When one is new or unfamiliar with an area, finding the way and dealing with traffic from can be frustrating and tiresome. It can actually shorten visitor trips and encourage travelers to leave. On top of this, one must remember that traffic can be annoyingly slow in the Currituck County area adding to driver frustration. Thus it is incumbent upon Currituck County to ensure wayfinding, signage and traffic management is as easy as possible.

In order to grow travel and tourism, Currituck County must ensure traffic wayfinding is as easy as possible.

Visitors report they need an accurate, user-friendly map with written directions to help them find their way. Also, they want signage leading them to attractions and amenities. They want signs placed so they have the time necessary to negotiate their way into the proper turn lanes, etc. If the route they must travel is long, they also want “reassurance” signage confirming they are on the right path. Wayfinding and signage is a constant challenge and becomes the one area that is easy for a destination to ignore or forget about. After all, the residents know their way around. There are always many priorities for time, so this is inherently easy to ignore.

In the survey portions of this study, we learned that signage and wayfinding were rated a poor 3.82 on a 1-5 scale where 1=low and 5=high. This low rating puts even more importance on providing excellent wayfinding and signage for visitors. Further, the most prominently mentioned “dislikes” included traffic, crowds and distances.

RTM recommends the following for Currituck County to continue to enhance wayfinding, signage and traffic management:

- 2. Develop a signage program that guarantees ease of finding cash registers on Highways 168/158**
 - Consider developing a Highway 168/158 program that provides landmark signage for amenities located on and along this major route. This would tie in with directional signage to restaurants, attractions, and shopping amenities.
- 3. Traffic management on Highway 12**
 - A plan for traffic management along Highway 12 needs to ensure that traffic frustration is managed effectively. At what point should traffic capacity be increased?

Recommended Strategies

Marketing, Advertising and Public Relations

RTM reviewed the CCDTT marketing materials and analyzed the design, format, and message content. These aspects were compared to research data findings from this study. The following materials were reviewed:

- Website: www.visitcurrituck.com
- The Official Currituck Outer Banks Guide
- CCDTT print ads and placement
- CCDTT public relations efforts and results
- State of North Carolina visitor guide
- State of North Carolina tourism website

In evaluating the materials above, the following was noted by the RTM team:

- The materials have a good quality look, with good consistency of imagery.
- The logo is used consistently and contains an established typeface treatment for the words “Currituck Outer Banks NC” and four primary icons featuring a sailboat, a sun, a sea shell, and a starfish.
- The visitor guide and other materials are logically formatted with sections for the mainland, the Corolla area, etc.
- Photography and design reflect beach activities, families, and good images representing the Outer Banks and Currituck County. We were pleased to see a good number of photographs showing families having fun together.

In this study we learned that those who inquired to the CCDTT used the following sources for trip planning (in rank order):

Source	%
Internet – North Carolina tourism website	18.79%
Guides – Currituck Outer Banks visitor guide	18.47%
Internet – Currituck Outer Banks tourism website	16.56%
Guides – North Carolina state travel guide	13.69%
Magazines – Coastal Living	12.42%
Newspapers – Travel feature stories	10.83%
Guides – AAA Tour Book	10.83%
Magazines – Southern Living	10.51%
Welcome Centers – North Carolina State Welcome Center (specify)	9.24%
Magazines – Budget Travel	8.60%
Magazines – AAA Home & Away	8.28%
Magazines – Travel & Leisure	7.64%
Newspapers – Newspaper ad or insert (specify)	7.01%
Magazines – Conde Nast Traveler	6.37%
Other (specify)	5.10%
Magazines – AAA World	4.78%
Internet – On-line travel service (Expedia, Orbitz, etc.)	4.78%
Magazines – Country Living	4.46%
Magazines – National Geographic Travel	3.82%
Magazines – Carolina Living	3.18%
Magazines – Modern Bride	3.18%

Recommended Strategies

Magazines – Disney Family Fun	2.55%
Magazines – O Magazine	2.55%
Magazines – Bridal Guide	2.23%
Magazines – Southern Bride	2.23%
Magazines – Destination Weddings & Honeymoons	1.91%
Magazines – Golf Digest	1.91%
Internet – Other web site (specify)	1.91%
Magazines – AAA Journey	1.59%
Guides – Currituck Outer Banks Wedding & Event Planner	1.59%
Magazines – Golf for Women	0.96%
Magazines – Civil War Traveler	0.64%
Magazines – Leisure Family & Heritage	0.64%
Survey Sample (N) =	314

This ranking provides clues as to the most critically important marketing tools for the CCDTT.

RTM makes the following recommendations for marketing tools and materials for CCDTT:

4. Recommendations for improving the Official Currituck Outer Banks Guide

This piece is used in all fulfillment and distribution programs.

The 2007 visitor guide headline is “More Than The Ocean. More Than A Vacation. More Than You Imagined.”. The primary front cover photo shows a family group at the beach, while smaller inset photos depict a romantic couple, a lighthouse, and the wild horses. These images are good and RTM recommends that future versions of this guide retain this format as it focuses on that which makes Currituck County unique from other destinations.

Further, RTM recommends new versions of the visitor guide contain the following information in the order which we have presented below:

NOTE: The 2007 visitor guide does not include advertisements. Travelers report to RTM that they prefer to have visitor guides contain advertisements as long as the ads do not disturb the flow of the guide. This may help with costs as time goes by.

- **“Hook” on the top, front one-third panel of guide:** This is the hook that will generate interest. It must be based on the positioning statement adopted by the CCDTT. Again, RTM recommends:

Currituck Outer Banks, NC

**Coastal Carolina’s serene beach, wild horses,
lighthouse, and historic village**

www.visitcurrituck.com

Recommended Strategies

4. (Continued)

- **Rack size (4" x 9" format).** Cities as large as Memphis successfully use this format. It is cost effective to mail (make it a self mailer, no envelope) and works well in the brochure racks. The CCDTT is currently using this finished size format.
- **Design and typefaces.** Simply put, don't let design get in the way. Keep it clean and user-friendly. Also, use an easy-to-read typeface. Remember, this brochure will be used in low-light and most likely in a moving vehicle. Bold typefaces with dark letters on a light background are necessary, especially for aging Baby Boomer eyes.
- **Photography.** Overall the current photography is good. RTM encourages CCDTT to continually produce fresh photography that features the unique distinctions of Currituck County and constantly reinforce the images of "Carolina Coast", wild horses, shopping, dining, serene beaches, family gatherings, and quality time experiences. The only photos that should be used in a brochure should be lively, animated, current photos that depict visitors having a good time. Outdated photos or photos of empty places do little to compel visitation
- **Emotional connection.** The next step for this brochure is to create an emotional connection that places the reader in the experience of visiting Currituck County. This emotional connection appeals to the senses and speaks of the sights, sounds, relaxation and fun experiences one can enjoy in Currituck County. Perhaps add what truly speaks to the five senses and what the typical visitor will hear, smell, see, taste, feel, etc. Make it personal and make it come alive for the reader.
- **"Musts."** The next critical factor is to tell the potential visitor about specific unique attractions and experiences they will find in Currituck County. This tells the visitor why they should stay here as opposed to other areas. This includes those things that were rated most highly in the research study. Specifically, RTM recommends this section include:
 - The scenic, peaceful "Coastal Carolina" Currituck beaches (feature what makes them different from other beaches)
 - Currituck Beach Lighthouse
 - Historic Corolla Village (historic sites, shops, restaurants)
 - Wild horses (their history and how to find them)
 - Unique amenities (lodging, dining, boutique shopping)
 - Additionally, RTM recommends adding the unique activities that people enjoy in Currituck County including crabbing, kite flying, and wildlife viewing
- **Geographic Layout.** The current geographic layout is perfect. RTM recommends no changes, except to include a map on the first page spread that clearly shows the geographic color coding and make it easier to see how to use the guide.
- **Table of Contents.** RTM recommends no changes. A table of contents makes these guides more user-friendly.

Recommended Strategies

4. (Continued)

- **Idiot-proof map.** A comprehensive, very clear map needs to be one of the first items found in this visitor guide. An effective map is critical for Currituck County due to its unusual parallel and linear configuration. This is made even more challenging for Currituck County as its map needs to include parts of Virginia and the lower Outer Banks as well. RTM recommends that CCDTT confer with several map making sources in order to examine the most user-friendly format. It will likely need to be in a fold-out format, perhaps at the end of the guide. Additionally, RTM recommends designing the map to include alpha-numeric grids to assist with wayfinding. Add icons, (numbered triangles for lodging, numbered squares for attractions, numbered dots for unique dining), include map references and icon numbers in all listings including attractions, lodging, dining, shopping, etc. Again, this map is one of the most critically important marketing pieces as it will often be the only source of facilitating visitors getting to cash registers. And remember, the biggest “dislike” reported by visitors was traffic, crowds and wayfinding issues. Take the time to work and re-work this map to ultimate perfection.
- **Listing of unique restaurants.** In this study we learned that the number one visitor activity is dining. One of the first decisions a visitor makes after choosing the destination and lodging is where to eat. RTM recommends this be the first section featured in the guide. Currently the guide has all restaurants listed in their own geographic area rather than listing them all together. RTM agrees that is best. Within each geographic section one finds either a one or two-page spread for restaurants in a grid format. RTM recommends that the general format remains the same and that it be maintained in this geographically oriented grid format. However, we would like to see a brief two-line descriptor such as “Casual bistro-style café” or “local home-cooking style dining” added under each listing. Also, it would perhaps be wise to more clearly separate the restaurants from the markets and fast food listings. Chain and fast food restaurants do not require a description since the vast majority of visitors are familiar with the offerings. Those local merchants who are disturbed by the CCDTT not printing a comprehensive listing need to be reminded that a full listing of restaurants should be available in lodging throughout the area and the visitor center. The ultimate goal of the visitor guide is to compel visitation and expenditures. Again, be sure to include map co-ordinates in the listings.

Recommended Strategies

4. (Continued)

- **Shopping.** Shopping is always one of the top activities for visitors. And, as we learned in this study it is the number one activity listed following dining. Since dining is not exactly a discretionary activity, shopping is even more important as an activity. Plus, the current per-visitor expenditures for shopping are below what one might hope to find. Thus, having a section that features the unique and significant shopping for Currituck County is of prime importance. As with the restaurant listing (above), one wants to showcase the larger shopping venues, but also showcase the unique shopping such as fine art, craft, and specialty shopping that would help drive longer stays and greater spending. Include a one or two line descriptor that help visitors determine what kind of goods they will find. Include store hours and directions. Be sure to include map co-ordinates in the listings to help with wayfinding. Currently there is a listing of available shopping in each geographic section, but there is little in the way of compelling description for these shopping venues. They need more “word-smithing” to lure visitors and compel retail spending.
- **Listing of attractions.** Beyond the “musts,” visitors need to know all the attractions that are available for enjoyment. This is an actual listing, providing all details visitors need in order to plan a trip. Specifically RTM recommends:
 - Each listing should have a brief *compelling* description, street address, accurate driving directions, and hours of operation, accessibility information, costs and contact information. Include a map reference (A-3, C-7).
 - Do not feel you must list every historic site or performance venue as an attraction. Those attractions that are not easily accessible or are open “only by appointment” or for specific performances should be listed separately to prevent visitor frustration in searching only to find that they are not open.
 - Limited sites – list attractions or sites that have limited hours or are “by appointment only” or “drive by only” under a separate heading to prevent visitor frustration.
- **Listing of lodging and amenities.** Next in the trip facilitation process is to help the visitor choose overnight lodging. RTM recommends a chart/grid format as it is easy to compare lodging amenities. Also, tourists report to us they prefer to have photos of each lodging property. For CCDTT this can best be accomplished with providing website links to the rental companies where potential visitors can see photos and listings of the rental houses.
- **Gatherings/Weddings/Reunions/Meetings.** Small groups, weddings, families, and social clubs are good year-round business for Currituck County. RTM recommends adding this information in a one-page format that also features types of groups and meetings that can come to Currituck County as well as the facilities (and appropriate website links) that will accommodate them. Call it, “**Group Gathering Places.**” Many leisure visitors may be potential small group/meeting planners, so make sure they know about the meeting possibilities in each geographic region of Currituck County.

Recommended Strategies

4. (Continued)

- **Events.** Currently, these are listed geographically. However, RTM finds that events are more time sensitive than place sensitive. In other words, it might work better if the visitor can go to one page where events are listed in the guide, making it easier for them to find events that are happening during their visits. Reference the website “Events Page” as the place to go for detailed information to save space in the guide.
- **Contact for more information.** Include the website address along with a toll free number at the bottom of every panel. Additionally, list the visitor center addresses and contact information where possible
- **Distribution plan.** A formal distribution plan is required for guide disbursement. Various distribution agencies and/or other distribution methods must be investigated and retained. For Currituck County the priority for distribution is all visitor information sites within the county, those along the Outer Banks, the state welcome centers, and distribution along Interstate 95 and east.

5. **Inexpensive maps with limited information**

Once the map recommended in number 4 (above) has been perfected, RTM highly recommends the development of a map to be used in helping with wayfinding and promotion. These maps should be designed to include:

- Two color format, 11 x 14, white uncoated paper stock (so it is easy to highlight).
- Design should have consistent imagery with all marketing materials
- Same icons as visitor guide map (cross reference) - feature “must-sees”, attractions, lodging, dining/shopping and other amenities.
- Sell ads on perimeter to defray costs if needed.
- The backside of the map can be printed to provide descriptions of attractions, must sees and other visitor amenities.
- Consider developing and printing these maps on glued pads so they can be supplied in quantity to rental companies, hotels, restaurants, attractions, etc. and simply be torn off and highlighted as needed.
- If this map is designed correctly, it will become the most used map in Currituck County. If it is as effective as RTM recommends, it will easily become the number one marketing tool for the CCDTT. Thus, do not hesitate to include marketing information on this map.
- This map should include the website address and other contact information.

Recommended Strategies

6. Inquiry and fulfillment procedures

CCDTT has outstanding procedures for tracking website hits and inquires. RTM is impressed with the record keeping and reporting practices. Only by tracking the *volume* and *source* of inquiries can the CCDTT best determine which advertising placements are effectively driving visitation.

Further, once inquiries are received, they must be “fulfilled” with information. The key goals to be addressed in fulfillment of inquiries are:

- Phone numbers and the website for the CCDTT should be featured in Every advertising placement.
- All inquiries received by the CCDTT should be recorded and tracked including the following information:
 - Date received
 - Source of Inquiry (Name of publication, etc.)
 - Inquirer name, address, phone, E-mail, etc.
- All forms of inquiry should be tracked including:
 - Walk-ins
 - Phone calls
 - Ad responses
 - Website hits, unique visitor sessions, and inquiries for more information
 - Other
- The workload for processing these inquiries has grown steadily. Plus, Currently all fulfillment is handled at the Corolla visitor center. This requires a substantial amount of hauling materials to the site, processing, and then hauling mailings to the post office. And, in the event of a hurricane, all materials must be moved to avoid the risk of potential water damage. This is cumbersome at best. RTM recommends the CCDTT consider outsourcing fulfillment to allow for speed and efficiency in processing. Consideration for this includes:
 - Cost of the fulfillment package including printing, labor and postage.
 - Speed of fulfillment: same day, first class postage is preferred.
 - Contents of the package: ideally it includes additional information at the inquirers request. Custom tailored packages are hot.
 - All bulk inquiries (magazine, newspaper etc.) must be received in electronic format (disc or e-mail) and be processed within three days of receipt.
 - All inquiries from various sources must be merged into one master database and maintained permanently. Trends must be tracked from these records so they will never be purged or destroyed.
 - Develop E-mail address data mine for future marketing.

Recommended Strategies

7. **E-marketing, blogs and social networking**

Technology management including e-marketing, and advantageous placement on traveler blogs and social networks (my space.com, facebook.com, tripadvisor.com, etc.) has become one of the hottest, most advantageous forms of marketing. In social networks, consumer-to-consumer recommendations are considered far more compelling than advertising. This requires new skill sets to master and utilize these powerful technologies. It is clear they are critical for destinations.

- CCDTT to assign technology marketing to its staff and develop the skill sets required for this marketing effort.

8. **Advertisement design**

- All ads must reflect the positioning and design elements of all other CCDTT materials for a consistent image. Ads should be designed professionally and feature the positioning statement wording recommended by RTM in this report plus the most compelling reasons to visit the area.
- Ads need to be simple, consistent, and clean.
- As with the visitor guide, keep the photography fresh and focused on the key messages (lighthouses, wild horses, serene beaches), and show families having fun relaxing, shopping and dining in Currituck County.

9. **Advertising planning and placement**

Plan annual advertising investments based on research, objectives, and previous year evaluations and conversion rates. Potential placements need to be analyzed against cost-per-inquiry documentation by the CCDTT. The visitor inquiry mail survey conducted as part of this research revealed the following information sources as the rank order for generating inquiries:

- *North Carolina tourism Internet website*
- *Currituck Outer Banks visitor guide*
- *Currituck County Internet website (www.visitcurrituck.com)*
- *North Carolina state travel guide*
- *Coastal Living Magazine*
- *AAA Tour Book*
- *Southern Living*
- *Budget Travel*
- *AAA Home & Away*
- *Travel and Leisure*
- *Conde Nast Traveler*
- *AAA World*
- *Country Living*
- *National Geographic*
- *Carolina Living*
- *Modern Bride*
- *Disney Family Fun*
- *O Magazine*

Recommended Strategies

9. (Continued)

- *Bridal Guide*
- *Southern Bride*

The CCDTT's advertising placement program needs to be evaluated based on the number of inquiries received for each placement and the resulting cost per inquiry. As referenced earlier, the CCDTT needs to continue tracking inquiries in order to consistently improve placement selection and lower the cost per inquiry.

10. Reunion, meeting, sports, group tour and event planner's guides

Planners of all types of events tell us in repeated studies they only want information for their type of event. Bulky, comprehensive four-color publications are out. Even in sports, basketball tournament planners do not want a bulky sports guide filled with soccer and baseball facilities. In essence, the contents are produced at desktop with covers that are tailored to the specific group or client, creating a tailor made piece with information strictly of interest to them. While CCDTT does not have a significant group business at this time, this may change over the coming years. In order to prepare for this, RTM recommends the following considerations:

- Design a folder that is easy to file in a hanging file folder.
- Avoid boilerplate "Welcome" pages and other filler information.
- Design the cover to print the client's name on it and let the client know you have compiled it just for them.
- Include a Table of Contents if there are multiple sections.
- Keep it lean and factual. Avoid filling it up with stuff.
- Include only the information directly relating to the needs of the planner.
- A basic handout format (list of contents) can be developed for distribution at meeting planner associations and shows.
- Use the visitor guide and padded map for general information.
- A chart-style listing for lodging and facilities specific to the type of event is good and allows the planner to efficiently determine which options work best.
- Including the listing of catering or group services is good.
- Meetings - Do not forget to add a list of potential local speakers and their topics as this can make having a meeting in Currituck County more cost effective. Local colleges are sure to have a host of good speakers on a wide range of topics.
- Include a pocket in the back where additional information can be provided (i.e. CCDTT's visitor guide).

Recommended Strategies

11. **CVB website**

Nationally, travel research reflects dramatic growth in Internet use for planning. One can be certain that potential travelers to Currituck County will continue to become increasingly reliant on the Internet for travel planning. The website is where you MUST become a cruise ship on land. We learned in this study that 28.2% of all visitors to Currituck County plan their trip in one month or less. Therefore, the Internet website is of absolute critical importance to the CCDTT and its tourism marketing efforts. RTM investigated the site www.visitcurrituck.com and makes the following observations and recommendations:

- Our first impression with the website is that it contains all the right information but the home page is very wordy. It looks intimidating rather than compelling.
- When we searched for “Currituck County” on Google the www.visitcurrituck.com website did not show up in either of the first two pages, although a number of other entities in Currituck County did including cometourbeach.com which took us to the CCDTT website. The www.visitcurrituck.com website did come up quickly when we typed in “Currituck Outer Banks.” Thus, additional investigation may be needed to ensure effective search engine placement.

Below are our specific recommendations:

- **Home Page.** This homepage needs less words and more emotional impact. Develop a home page that includes the recommended positioning; have a design including photography that focuses very clearly on the *compelling* reasons why one should visit Currituck County (serene beaches, wild horses, lighthouses, etc.). One must remember that the visitor experience begins with this first stop at the website home page.
- **Website Imagery** needs to be adapted to match the revised marketing materials recommended in this report.
- **Photos.** The existing photos are good. Make sure photos are not just building exteriors – but rather show people having fun. Lively photos are needed throughout the site. Photography can be a powerful tool in capturing the unique distinctions of Currituck County.
- **Visitor Testimonials.** RTM recommends scattering those on pages throughout the site, including the home page. Remember the current impact of consumer-to-consumer recommendations. This is one way of capturing this power. Also, RTM recommends that CCDTT have a section titled “**Your Favorites**” where visitors are encouraged to write CCDTT and tell them about their favorite experiences, places, etc. in Currituck County. Again, drive the consumer recommendations!

Recommended Strategies

11. (Continued)

- **Reunions, Weddings and Gatherings.** RTM suggests adding this button to the home page to help with planning reunions, group events and gatherings. This is already a major factor in Currituck County visitation and this is one way of help support this continued growth. Making it easy will speed the growth of this segment. Include tips for planning a reunion, wedding, or family gathering including places to play, shop, etc. List restaurants and hotels that work with groups. Include places to get party supplies, caterers, flowers and other event supplies and amenities that will be useful to the planner.
- **Restaurants.** Dining needs to feature photos and restaurant listings with brief descriptions that literally make readers drool! The current listings are good, but there are few compelling photographs. CCDTT might even recommend that local restaurants post their weekly specials or favorite menu items. Actually, their entire menu could be a “click-through” addition. RTM also recommends that the chain and fast food restaurants be moved to the end of the list by having an initial heading for “Local Flavor” and then a separate listing titled “Chain and Fast Food Restaurants”. The chain and fast food restaurants do not require photographs and extensive write ups. Visitors already know what to expect. It is the locally owned, local-flavor restaurants that need interpretation. Perhaps inset boxes in other website sections can talk about unique foods such as home-made pies, etc. Dining is a major component of the visitor experience and time should be invested to get this part of the website as outstanding as possible.
- **Shopping.** Nationally, shopping is the top tourist activity reported by visitors. Again, we learned in this study that shopping is not producing the high economic impact that it could. Therefore, using the website to inspire shopping is wise. RTM recommends featuring shopping on the home page with photos of people having fun shopping. The shopping page of the website (much like the attractions and dining) features a listing of shops that includes a brief description, hours of operation, address and contact information. Again, RTM recommends “romancing” the listing more with dynamic, “gotta have it” photography and more word-smithing to describe the type of merchandise found at the various shops listed. Make them drool! This is one of the best ways to increase per-visitor spending and drive greater economic impact. The tax relief generated by shopping deserves the time and attention that should be invested in making this section of the website exceptional.
- **Lodging.** Generally speaking visitors report to RTM they prefer a grid format for lodging options where they can easily scan the categories to determine which properties have pools, allow pets, have wireless internet, exercise facilities, etc. This desire by visitors presents challenges for Currituck County where 95% of the lodging is rental houses managed by companies. Currently the CCDTT has an alphabetical “telephone book” style listing of these companies which forces the potential visitor to either click endlessly or to choose a rental company with which they are already familiar. The most user-friendly solution for the potential

Recommended Strategies

11. (Continued)

visitor would be for all this listings to be combined into one database. However, that is unlikely to happen. Unfortunately, the current method of listing rental companies is the only viable option. Perhaps there could be a summary page at the top of this page that lists the total number of rental units, as well as some key facts such as number of homes with pools, number of homes that allow pets, number of properties for large groups, etc. This information could at least serve as a teaser to inspire potential visitors to keep clicking until they find the option they prefer. At the very least, CCDTT should be aware of the sheer investment of time required by a potential visitor to book a vacation in Currituck County. Another option may be to allow for assistance in which the prospective visitor simply calls the CCDTT office and gets assistance in house hunting, almost like a concierge service. It might be a good idea to at least test this concept.

- **Attractions.** Currently, attractions are listed in the same format as restaurants and shopping. The list is presented alphabetically with accompanying photos, descriptions, and hours of operation, addresses and contact information. Overall, RTM feels there needs to be more “sizzle” added to the descriptions. In reviewing this list, some seem under-promoted and others promoted beyond their actual delivery of quality experiences. RTM recommends separating these listings into those that are consistently open and accessible while having a separate category for those that are open seasonally, are drive-by only, or are open by appointment only.
- **Activities.** This section is well done and allows potential visitors to not only find out about where to engage in various activities, but lists outfitters, retailers and equipment vendors for the various activities. Excellent! However, more photos and a little more word-smithing of the narrative would be even better.
- **Events.** A brief annual events page should be included. RTM recommends first showing the brief annual events in a calendar format and include the calendar at the bottom. When the dates are selected, a message needs to pop up at the beginning of the items listed that says “These are the events scheduled during the dates you selected.” Be sure to include a message at the bottom of the page that says, “click here for a listing of dining and lodging options”.
- **Request Visitor Guide.** The “request Visitor Guide” section should include a short survey to obtain potential visitor demographic information. The information requested should include:
 - Zip code
 - Primary trip purpose
 - How the reader learned about website (source of information)
 - Anticipated trip date (one month, two months, etc.)
 - Anticipated travel party size (number of adults and children)
 - Activities of interest
 - Interest in offering email address for future mailings

The data obtained in this section should be analyzed annually.

Recommended Strategies

11. (Continued)

- **Maps.** The same issues exist for this map as the map recommended as part of the visitor guide. This website needs to include a downloadable version of the map for Currituck County. Again, this map needs to also cover parts of Virginia and the other Outer Banks regions.
- **Media.** RTM recommends including a media section of the website, rather than having this listed under “Services” to make it easier for travel writers and the media to easily locate photos, story ideas, and contact information. RTM recommends adding downloadable photos and other audio/video to make story preparation easy for media. Also, a listing of suggested story angles would be helpful for writers and editors. It is also a good idea to have a library of previous stories that can be read. These stories might also be listed under another heading such as “**Currituck Stories**”

12. E-marketing for Convention/Meeting/Sports attendees

One of the most effective technologies that the CCDTT can employ is the use of E-mailers for meetings/gatherings/sports and other group event attendees. The CCDTT would prepare E-mailers that identify the top things to see and do, great restaurants and shopping, events, etc. tailored for meeting/event attendees at a specific meeting or hotel. Then, the meeting planner is given the mailing to send out to their meeting attendees in advance of the meeting. This makes the meeting attendee feel welcomed, tells them “where the good stuff is” and encourages them to stay longer and spend more money. Everyone wins! Further, the event attendee is given the chance to enter their E-mail address for future mailings on upcoming events, etc.

Recommended Strategies

13. Trade and consumer shows

Trade and consumer shows are an important part of outreach efforts for the CCDTT. It allows the organization an opportunity to present its message to large numbers of group and leisure trip planners. RTM recommends the CCDTT look for consumer shows primarily in the target markets of Virginia, the Mid-Atlantic, Mid-West and nearby southern states including Tennessee, North Carolina, Kentucky, and West Virginia.

RTM recommends the CVB employ the following principals for attendance to trade and consumer shows:

- Be prepared with the newly designed visitor guide.
- Increase leisure consumer show attendance in research-identified target market areas.
- Booth displays should be visually exciting and utilize the same imagery recommended in this report for brochures, ads, etc. Currituck County must look unique when compared to other beach destinations.
- Solicit support of local tourism “partners” for expenses, promotions, give-always, etc. Specifically partner with local rental companies, retail and attractions.
- After attendance to the trade show, an evaluation should be conducted (on an annual basis) to determine which shows generated sufficient “return-on-investment” and which did not. The next year’s plan of trade show attendance should be based on this analysis.

Recommended Strategies

Promotional Efforts

14. Front line information at rental companies

- One of the most critical audiences for the CCDTT to reach is the existing overnight guest. The goal is to increase the awareness of the unique visitor opportunities that exist, increase lengths of stay, and increase expenditures.
- A key aspect of this strategy can be best accomplished by informing existing guests about what there is to see and do, as well as what dining, shopping and entertainment can be found.
- RTM recommends the front desk in every rental management company have a display for Currituck County area maps and the front-line personnel be coached in using these maps to help patrons with wayfinding and locating entertainment, dining and shopping options. This should be considered a top priority. Then the map will do the rest of the work by indicating the “must-sees” and the compelling information that enhances the image.

15. Shoulder and off-season promotions

- Conduct pin-point research with rental management companies as well as guests during the shoulder and off-seasons. The premise is that the most likely new visitor is one that matches the current, happy and satisfied visitor. In other words, find out who is already coming during the shoulder and off-seasons and then simply find more like them! Another source for investigation is the existing CCDTT database where potential visitors may have inquired about visiting during the shoulder and off seasons.
- There are activities and events scheduled in Currituck County for each season of the year. The CCDTT might develop a more aggressive E-marketing campaign promoting those seasonal and off season events to its existing database.
- Another strategy is to develop seasonal promotions such as “The Great Chefs of Currituck” in the autumn season or a birding/wildlife promotion in the spring season. In this type of strategy, a promotional concept is developed and then marketed as inexpensively as possible (such as E-marketing) for testing purposes. Once it proves to be a winner it might be worthy of more substantial marketing dollars.

Recommended Strategies

- 16. African-American, Hispanic, Gay and other minority segment promotions**
African-Americans, Hispanics, Gays and other minorities often report to RTM that they tend to visit only those areas where they are sure they are invited. For instance, African-Americans look for advertising that features photography including African-Americans, and special packages targeted to African-Americans. The same is true for other minority segments. Thus, RTM recommends that the CCDTT:
- Conduct pinpoint research with African-American and other major minority market segment inquirers who contact the CVB for visitor information. Determine the types of products and packages each market segment most desire related to Currituck County. Minority inquirers are quick to respond when they are sincerely asked to help identify products and promotions that offer the most appeal
 - After a period of time conducting inquiries, test market potential packages and promotions. Determine the feasibility of committing mores resource to these markets
 - Be sure to include photos of African-Americans, Hispanics and Gays in marketing materials

Recommended Strategies

Direct Sales Efforts

Many destinations rely on direct sales for convention, meeting, group tour, and sports market segments. Currituck County's visitor base is comprised (95%) of leisure tourism. This makes marketing much more of an important skill set than direct sales. However, it is important for the CCDTT to understand the typical role of direct sales and to be prepared to shift with future market conditions. For the foreseeable future, direct sales by the CCDTT will primarily involve sales calls to leisure tourism contacts such as AAA offices and trade shows, as well as a readiness to initiate group sales if needed.

17. Leisure tourism sales

- Leisure tourism is a critically important market and currently comprises approximately 95% of the entire lodging occupancy in Currituck.

In addition to the marketing and promotions recommended earlier in this document, RTM recommends that the CCDTT:

- Have a written outline of work that includes sales calls to AAA offices, travel agents, etc., along the Interstate 95 corridor. These AAA offices and travel agents can be an excellent source for recommending Currituck County to their customers.
- Identify trade shows (bridal, sporting, camping/boating, etc.) which will be beneficial for targeting leisure tourism prospects. Attend trade shows selectively and follow up stringently on any shows attended to evaluate effectiveness.

Recommended Strategies

18. Group tour and motorcoach sales – not a priority for Currituck County

Group tour and motorcoach is a very small percentage of overall lodging for Currituck County. The motorcoach market segment is one that many hotels and lodging properties are lukewarm about recruiting as they tend to be budget conscious and not as lucrative as other segments.

With its limited staff size, and the significant time in sales and follow up required to be successful with this market, RTM recommends that this not be a priority for the CCDTT.

For future reference, remember that if group tour/motorcoach is to be a priority for the CCDTT, the following points must be part of the plan:

- This is a market segment where relationship is valued. Therefore, a committed staff and consistent plan of sales and follow up must be maintained in order to achieve sufficient results.
- This program is based on attending trade shows, making sales calls, following up leads and stringent tracking.
- Partnering with local attractions to identify group tours that may be visiting. Research should be conducted with those overnighing in Currituck County and those choosing not to overnigh. One wants to determine which group tour groups provide the best potential for overnight business recruitment.

Group tour planners have, in numerous interviews, reported to RTM their criteria for choosing a destination in which to overnigh. The group tour planners criteria include:

- A nice, mid-priced meal and evening entertainment.
- A clean, updated mid-range hotel with an interior corridor in a quiet area.
- A destination organization that will work with them to provide special amenities and items that will make their group participants feel special.
- Unique itineraries that appeal to their specific audiences (whether seniors, youth groups or other specific niches).
- Tailored sales materials, including desktop publishing templates that can be tailored to each contact with suggested itineraries and reasons to choose to overnigh in Currituck County as an exclusive trip or while in route to other locations.
- Appropriate step-on guides need to be identified and recruited for this effort. Many group tours demand the availability of step-on guides and the CCDTT must ensure that this is available.

Recommended Strategies

19. Convention and meeting recruitment – service incoming calls and realize limited capacity for sales and outreach

- The convention and meeting segment, including SMERF, comprises a small portion of visitation to Currituck County. Thus, meetings and conferences are not currently a priority for the CCDTT.
- The CCDTT is limited by its staff size and resources. This makes significant sales efforts impossible, and reduces the current CCDTT capability to more of a “serve the calls received” than a serious direct sales and outreach effort.

Therefore, RTM recommends the following:

- When calls are received from meeting and event planners, first determine if they are repeat or first-time potential customers.
- If they are repeat, find out what is needed to satisfy their return business.
- Prepare desktop print materials that can be tailored to each contact to sell the attributes of Currituck County as a destination for convention and meeting planners.
- Work with lodging partners to determine roles and functions in servicing current and repeat business.
- Prepare an annual report documenting the CCDTT’s meeting sales efforts and results.

Recommended Strategies

Governance for Currituck County Tourism

The leaders of Currituck County are to be commended for their commitment to travel and tourism. RTM gets the sense that community leaders have worked hard to determine the best course of action for the development of tourism in Currituck County.

The primary concern RTM has regarding governance for any destination marketing organization is that its leadership include both industry *stakeholders*, meaning local travel industry professionals, as well as experienced, civic-minded local business who will ensure that all tourism growth benefits the county overall.

RTM has no issue with the current leadership structure for the CCDTT. As time goes by, and the tourism industry in Currituck County continues to grow, County officials may choose to establish a more traditional structure for tourism management. RTM recommends that Currituck County identify the leadership that will proactively and positively lead the tourism industry into the future. This would likely include an organization such as a tourism authority or convention and visitors bureau under the supervision of the county officials. This organization would be tasked with monitoring the economic impact of the tourism industry and overseeing the occupancy tax collections and disbursement and return on investment.

RTM recommends the following for leadership of a local tourism industry:

- One-third of board/authority members being comprised of lodging representatives and stakeholders who have a vested interest in the health of the local tourism industry. Those whose livelihoods depend on the economic health of the travel and tourism industry serve well the needs of the industry.
- One-third of the board/authority members representing attractions, shopping, dining, and other travel amenities that serve the traveling public.
- One-third of board/authority members being business and community leaders who appreciate the economic impact generated by the tourism industry and its benefits to the local citizens. Those with broad business and community vision understand the importance of protecting and supporting tourism as an economic development catalyst.
- Further, committees should be created only on an as-needed-basis to perform specific tasks. Efforts should be made to include representation from tourism entities on each committee.

The Destination Marketing Association International (DMAI) is a membership organization of CVB organizations that maintains extensive research that provides communities with excellent resources for determining most effective staffing and funding options for tourism. RTM recommends that as the CCDTT continues to grow, their practices be continually measured against the standards established by DMAI for appropriate development.

- 20. No changes are recommended now for tourism leadership in Currituck County. However, as the CCDTT continues to grow and mature, RTM recommends development of a tourism authority or convention and visitors bureau, led by industry stakeholders and business leaders to best guide the continued growth of the industry.**

Recommended Strategies

Funding For Currituck County Tourism

As is the standard in the tourism industry, all occupancy tax monies should be used exclusively for growing tourism revenues, promotion of overnight visitation and supporting facilities that drive increased visitation and expenditures by out-of-area visitors. The overriding question to be asked regarding ANY tourism tax expenditures is “Will it bring more visitors to the Currituck County area?” If a strong, affirmative and reliable answer to this question cannot be provided, it is not a wise expenditure. This should be the guiding principle for all future uses of occupancy tax dollars. The following chart shows current lodging tax collection in Currituck County.

Occupancy Taxes and Corresponding Sales Taxes

The CCDTT is funded through annual appropriations received from the Currituck County Board of Commissioners. Each spring, the CCDTT prepares a budget request that is submitted as part of the overall County budget to be reviewed by the five-member Currituck County Board of Commissioners who also serve as the TDA. The funding allocation is taken from funds generated by a 6% occupancy tax on all lodging less than thirty (30) days in Currituck County. The totals of that occupancy tax and corresponding sales taxes are shown below:

Currituck Lodging Tax Revenues

Year	6% Transient Occupancy Tax Actual Revenue	4.25% North Carolina Sales Tax	2.5% Currituck Sales Tax
2001/02	\$2,828,107	\$2,003,242	\$1,178,378
2002/03	\$3,130,910	\$2,217,728	\$1,304,545
2003/04	\$3,268,297	\$2,315,044	\$1,361,790
2004/05	\$4,667,481	\$3,306,132	\$1,944,784
2005/06	\$5,322,539	\$3,770,132	\$2,217,725

Source: www.co.currituck.nc.us/tax/Occupancy_Tax_Amounts_Collected.asp
Sales tax amounts calculated by RTM based on Occupancy Tax figures

The occupancy tax has been amended over the years, and today is legislated to be used as follows:

Year	Levy	Purpose
1987	3%	Tourism related expenditures
1991	1%	1/3 Tourism related expenditures 2/3 Promotion of travel and tourism
1999	2%	1/3 Tourism related expenditures 2/3 Promotion of travel and tourism

Recommended Strategies

Additional Visitor Spending and Sales Taxes that Benefit Currituck County

In addition to the occupancy tax and corresponding sales taxes, it is critically important for Currituck County leaders to understand that the county also benefits significantly from other visitor expenditures, namely food/dining, retail shopping, transportation, and other visitor spending. The chart below provides a reliable accounting of daily/trip expenditures based on research conducted with actual overnight visitors to Currituck County.

Rental Only
Total Trip Spending (Daily Expenditures x 3.97 nights)

<u>Spending Category</u>	<u>Total</u>	6% Occ. Tax	4.25% NC Tax	2.5% County Tax
Lodging	\$835.49	\$50.13	\$35.51	\$20.89
Food/meals	\$265.99		\$11.30	\$6.65
Transportation, fuel, etc.	\$171.74		\$7.30	\$4.29
Shopping	\$131.07		\$5.57	\$3.28
Attractions/amusements	\$117.04		\$4.97	\$2.93
Average Trip Total	\$1,521.33	\$50.13	\$64.65	\$38.04

These statistics provide solid evidence of a more accurate total picture of the sales taxes generated by visitors which benefits Currituck County and its residents. Further, one should note that there is significant spending by daytrippers and those passing through Currituck County on their way to other parts of the Outer Banks that is not captured in this report. That spending for shopping, food markets, auto fuel, etc., has yet to be quantified and measured.

RTM encourages the leaders of Currituck County to not limit their understanding of the full benefits of the travel industry by measuring solely the occupancy taxes, but rather by recognizing the full visitor spending and resulting taxes. It is important that Currituck County learn to measure and track these full expenditures in order to guide future efforts in increasing those expenditures. Growing these total expenditures provides the true benefit of tourism to Currituck County. In essence, one wants to use the occupancy taxes as “fertilizer” to track and grow the total expenditures and resulting sales taxes.

- 21. RTM recommends CCDTT continue to annually track all visitor expenditures and build its skill set at monitoring and measuring the total sales taxes generating by daytrip and overnight visitors to Currituck County. This will best guide continued development of the tourism industry in Currituck County.**

Recommended Strategies

CCDTT Offices and Staffing

Office and Visitor Center Facilities for CCDTT

The CCDTT is currently located at 145 Courthouse Road in a trailer adjacent to the County office complex. The full-time staff of five has a total of 521 square feet for their offices and storage space in this facility. RTM has worked with over one hundred destination marketing organizations and has never seen such cramped offices. While touring the facility, we found three marketing staffers sharing one office. The conditions are so cramped and crowded we found them to be an obstacle to productive work and are surprised that they have not been deemed a safety hazard. RTM reviewed the office systems in place and found that the marketing team has adequate computers, software and telecommunications to perform their job tasks. In addition to the cramped offices the CCDTT has 145 square feet of storage for print materials and supplies located at the Judicial Center.

The only Currituck visitor center operated by the CCDTT is located just north of Duck on the outer banks portion of the County. The visitor center is in a new, modern facility that is in an excellent gateway location with good directional signage and ample parking. The facility has approximately 1,642 square feet of space, is attractively designed and offers good information for the traveling public. It should be noted that all fulfillment is handled in this office, necessitating the hauling of fulfillment materials to the visitor center, then processing, then hauling the mail pieces back to the post office. RTM is particularly concerned with this cumbersome process in the event of storms or foul weather on the island that might result in water damage to materials.

22. RTM strongly recommends an immediately increase in office space and facilities for the CCDTT staff.

CCDTT: Public Information for Currituck County and Tourism Management

RTM was surprised during the course of this study to learn that the CCDTT serves as both the entire public information role for Currituck County as well as the tourism industry monitoring and promotion agency. This is a huge dual responsibility and is not a good match. The public information needs of the county are targeted primarily to residents. The tasks of monitoring and promoting tourism are geared primarily toward the travel industry constituents and the traveling public who live outside of Currituck County. Thus, this one agency is being asked to serve two completely different "masters." It is difficult to believe that they can do both well.

The role of a destination marketing organization (DMO) is to be "the voice of tourism" within the community. As such, the staff of the organization needs to understand the trends driving the industry. The staff needs to be aggressive in attaining awareness of the role of tourism in the community, with business and government leaders, industry stakeholders and constituents, and residents. In addition to its leadership roles, this DMO staff should be considered the marketing/advertising agency for tourism in the region. They exist to track, promote and market the destination to the traveling public with the objective of generating maximum economic impact and tax relief.

Recommended Strategies

Currently, the CCDTT staff has eight full-time staff positions. However, since these positions fulfill two missions, the budget is allocated for those two functions as follows:

Percentage of Total Occupancy Tax Promotion Expenditures

Note: "Promo" non-shaded rows total 100% and "PIO" shaded rows total 100%

Budget Category	2005/06	%	2006/07	%	2007/08	%
Salaries & Benefits – Promo	\$154,706	21.1%	\$261,243	17.5%	\$159,556	11.4%
Office Expenses – Promo	\$67,849	9.3%	\$229,122	15.3%	\$86,820	6.2%
Outreach – Promo	\$470,813	64.3%	\$1,005,550	67.1%	\$1,111,500	79.2%
Capital Outlay - Promo	\$39,371	5.3%	\$2,000	0.1%	\$46,000	3.2%
TOTAL Promo	\$732,739	100%	\$1,497,915	100%	\$1,403,876	100%
Salaries & Benefits – PIO	\$81,720	64.1%	\$87,939	57.6%	\$219,454	77.8%
Office Expenses - PIO	\$4,782	3.8%	\$19,300	12.6%	\$9,900	3.5%
Outreach – PIO	\$40,897	32.1%	\$45,370	29.7%	\$47,550	16.9%
Capital Outlay - PIO	\$0	0%	\$0	0%	\$5,000	1.8%
Total – PIO	\$127,398	100%	\$152,609	100%	\$281,904	100%
TOTAL - Combined	\$860,137		\$1,650,524		\$1,685,780	

Source: Currituck County 2007/08 Budget

The Destination Marketing Association International (DMAI) maintains records on all CVBs in the country. According to their benchmarks, DMAI recommends that budget allocations for staff fall in approximately the 25-40% range of total occupancy tax collections. To determine when it is time to add new staff, a CVB looks at the county tax collections and percentages of expenditures. If it finds staff costs are in the 25% or less range of total occupancy tax collected, it can reasonably be determined that there is more workload than the current staff can handle. In total, the DMAI recommends the following general guidelines for overall budgeting of a destination marketing organization:

- 25-40% of budget for salaries and benefits
- 10-15% of budget for overhead
- 40%+ for outreach and marketing

Thus, we see that Currituck County is collecting in excess of \$5 million in occupancy taxes, yet is reinvesting only \$1,403,876 in direct tourism tracking, promotion and marketing, or less than one-third. This does not appear to match the legislated mandates, and RTM encourages the leaders of Currituck County to undertake a serious investigation as to what constitutes a more reasonable funding level for the CCDTT. This industry is obviously important to the county and should be funded appropriately based on the growth and resulting tax revenues expected.

Recommended Strategies

23. Increase funding for CCDTT

- RTM recommends Currituck County investigate past funding for CCDTT and ensure that adequate funds are allocated relative to the legislated statutes and expectations for growth of the industry.

24. Recommended future staff additions for CCDTT

- RTM recommends that the following staff position be considered when adding new staff for CCDTT:
 - **Technology Manager:** Primary responsibilities would include website, database, E-marketing, and social network management.
 - **Leisure and Small Group Sales Manager:** Primary responsibilities would include sales calls to AAA offices, attending trade and consumer shows, and targeting small groups to generate interest in visiting Currituck County.

Recommended Strategies

Recommended Product Development

In considering new travel and tourism industry products and services, RTM first recommends that those reading this report study satisfaction ratings with current amenities and services. That information is seen below:

Overall 2006 Satisfaction Ratings (1-5 scale where 1=low and 5=high)

Overall Satisfaction Rating	Mail Inquiry Survey
5 (Excellent)	44.59%
4	44.59%
3 (Average)	10.81%
2	0.00%
1 (Poor)	0.00%
No Response	10.84%
Average Rating	4.34

Amenity	Mail Inquiry Survey
Quality of beaches	4.36
Quality of the lodging	4.00
Overall appeal of the attractions in the area	4.00
Ease of finding visitor information	3.93
Lodging value you received for the price paid	3.82
Level of service/employee training	3.89
Signage and wayfinding	3.82
Variety of shopping & merchandise	3.69
Range of choices for dining	3.71

In this study, we also asked tourists what products, services, and attractions they would most like to see added to the existing product mix. That data is shown in the following charts:

Which of the following would you like to see added in Currituck-Outer Banks, NC?

	Mail Inquiry Survey
Free trolley from Corolla to Manteo	29.87%
More dining variety	26.73%
A guided, narrated wildlife tour	20.13%
More lodging options	18.55%
A craft/artisan co-op featuring hand-made items	16.98%
Night-time entertainment	17.61%
Bike/walking paths in Corolla	16.67%
More shopping variety	14.78%
An interpretive showcase for the NC coast/Outer Banks region	10.69%
Other (specify)	3.46%

Recommended Strategies

What kind of lodging would you most like to see added in Currituck- Outer Banks?

More budget lodging	25.16%
Mid-price hotels such as Hilton Garden Inn, Holiday Inn Express, etc.	24.84%
Full service resort with specialty pools, kid programs, adult-only activities, etc.	19.50%
Hotels with family-size suites	15.72%
More bed & breakfast inns	15.09%
Modern full-service hotel with restaurant	11.01%
RV parks/camping	9.43%
Survey Sample (N) =	318

What kind of retail shop merchandise appeals to you most?

	Mail Inquiry Survey
Made in North Carolina items	39.94%
T-shirts & beach souvenirs	31.13%
Collectibles	29.25%
Clothing	26.73%
Edibles	27.67%
Jewelry and accessories	26.42%
Books & music	25.79%
Antiques	25.16%
Garden and patio	16.67%
Fine art	15.41%
Contemporary fine art crafts	15.41%
Health & beauty (soaps, bath products, etc.)	15.41%
Housewares & décor	15.09%
Surf, watersports, beach sports	14.47%
Shoes & purses	14.15%
Kitchen & dining	14.47%
Outdoor recreation equipment/outfitter	11.95%
Children's clothing & toys	10.06%
Furniture & home furnishings	9.75%
Electronics	5.66%
Other (specify)	3.46%

In analyzing this data, RTM first notes that visitors are generally satisfied with their overall visit, rating it a 4.34 on a 1-5 scale. This is very good. Additionally, the only categories of amenities that they rate below the critical 4.00 mark are choices for dining and shopping variety. Further, in testing for new lodging, nothing rated over a 25.16% level. RTM typically looks to find items that rate at or over a 40.00% mark. This is typically the level at which we feel confident that adding a particular new product will be successful. Thus, RTM interprets this lodging rating to indicate that visitors are fairly satisfied with the current lodging options. None seems to be exceptionally desired by a substantial number of visitors. Similarly, the same can be said about additional retail merchandise. While they rated the current offering substantially below the critical 4.00 mark (3.69) they only rated “made in North Carolina items” and “t-shirts and beach souvenirs” at over a 30.00% level. RTM interprets this to mean that they do not necessarily want different merchandise, just more shopping venues. RTM would recommend that this information be shared with retailers and that they be encouraged to add “made in North Carolina” displays of merchandise.

Recommended Strategies

In the following strategies, RTM recommends specific new products and programs that will speak to these needs and support growth of a stronger tourism market for Currituck County.

25. Currituck tourism logo merchandise

Respondents responded well to desiring more merchandise that is “made in North Carolina.” During our site evaluations of the area we found a strong amount of Outer Banks logo merchandise selling briskly. We noted a substantial number of visitors sporting t-shirts, sweatshirts, etc. with this logo. For that reason, RTM recommends more aggressive merchandising of Currituck County logo souvenirs and garments. This may be something that the CCDTT test markets at its visitor center. The income would benefit CCDTT and it is a great opportunity to test the appeal of this merchandise for other retailers in the county. RTM has a number of clients who have turned this strategy into substantial annual income.

26. Recruit “Coastal Carolina” unique dining

- Satisfaction with the current range of dining options was the most poorly rated category of amenities, falling well below the critically important 4.00 satisfaction level at 3.71. This is consistent with national research that tells us “restaurants” are the first major decision a typical visitor makes once they have arrived at the destination. Respondents in this survey reported that dining out was their most popular activity. Also, RTM has learned from numerous studies that it is *unique* dining that these visitors most actively seek. Whether it is local flavor style restaurants or fine dining, travelers enjoy finding dining options that differ from what they normally find at home
- RTM recommends Currituck County establish a priority of recruiting and encouraging development of new restaurants, as well as encouraging existing restaurants to add more unique, local flavor dishes. This can be accomplished as a cooperative effort between the CCDTT, the Chamber of Commerce and other economic development interests in the area
- For example, RTM has worked with several destinations that have made this a priority and sought to recruit owner/chefs to relocate to their towns. Sometimes incentives were offered, although most simply seek potential candidates, and then ensure promotion of the new restaurant until it has become well established.

Recommended Strategies

27. Develop an animated “Coastal Carolina” village-style shopping and entertainment district on the mainland

- Animated, village-style shopping, dining and entertainment districts are popular and have proven successful all over the U.S.
- RTM anticipates that such a development on the Currituck County mainland, especially if it had a waterfront location, would have immense appeal for leisure and business travelers and would generate exceptional tax relief for local residents.
- RTM would also encourage developers to consider adding housing and lodging rentals to such a development.
- The only caution RTM would add to this is to ensure the voice of the customer has been closely monitored. In numerous studies, we have learned shopping and entertainment districts needs to include the following:
 - An easy walking scale (women in high heels will not walk past one empty storefront after dark).
 - Well-lit at night.
 - Lively and exciting (translates to having a good number of people visible and colorful, animated surroundings).
 - Unique dining.
 - Entertainment options (movies, theater, fun activities).
 - Good resting places, weather protection and shade.
 - A relaxing atmosphere.
 - Fun shopping and dining options that appeal to Baby Boomer and GenX market segments.

Recommended Strategies

Hospitality Training

RTM recommends enhancing hospitality training in Currituck County to assist hospitality workers in understanding and communicating the unique positioning for tourism in this destination.

Hospitality training is a challenge for the tourism industry. The “front line” at state and local visitor centers, hotels, restaurants and attractions tends to have a high turnover. Finding and recruiting a sufficient number of employees is often a problem. Additionally, managers of these front lines may or may not have in-depth knowledge of best practices in tourism hospitality training. Thus, the industry has trouble in motivating what may be an already overworked and fluctuating work staff.

Therefore, RTM recommends the CCDTT work to provide the following support to the local tourism industry:

28. Recommended hospitality training

- Short (30 minute) on-site workshops for any local rental company front line staff, hotel, restaurant or attraction that requests hospitality training.
- A package of training materials that can be utilized by local area managers to provide on-going staff training.
- Small laminated cards, “The Must Sees of Currituck County” which identify the top things to see and do in the area. For Currituck County, this might even take on a seasonal perspective with a “core” group of continuous things to see and do and several items that change for each season. To increase the use and remembrance of these cards by local hospitality industry workers, we further suggest that a representative of the CVB periodically walk up to front line employees and ask “What do you say when asked, what is there to see and do around here?” Any respondent who can name all the things highlighted on the (seasonal) laminated card from memory receives \$25 on the spot. Be sure to also take their photo and send a news release and photo to the local newspaper for coverage of the ambassadors of tourism.

Recommended Strategies

Local Education

Tourism is an important part of the economy in Currituck County and it is an industry that is watched by the local residents. RTM recommends an annual educational effort designed to inform the local public regarding what tourists find most appealing about visiting Currituck County, as well as the objectives of the CVB and an annual report of results.

29. Recommended education for local population

- RTM recommends an annual report be placed in the local newspaper that identifies the objectives and accomplishments of the CCDTT. It is particularly important for residents of Currituck County to know the ***tax relief*** that is generated on their behalf by tourists. Residents can then read this and hopefully become better informed as to the importance of tourism to the area, as well as knowing what things are most appreciated by visitors.

Recommended Strategies

Additional Research and On-going Evaluation

Walt Disney said it best: “You don’t build it for yourself, you find out what the customer wants and you build it for them.” This is the essence of tourism success. Gone are the days when “if you build it they will come” worked in tourism. Today, there are simply too many choices already competing for the customer’s time and money. A destination who does not listen to the voice of the customer runs the risk of losing that customer to someone who does. That unfortunate scenario has been experienced in many industries. One only has to recall when American automobile manufacturers were so sure they knew what was best for the customer they neglected to do their homework. The Japanese listened intently to what the customer wanted and the rest, as they say, is history.

RTM recommends continued evaluation, research and measurement of tourism success, unmet needs and marketing efforts for the DMO. The specific components of this research strategy include the items listed.

30. Monthly occupancy, lodging market mix, travel party size survey

- Annual tracking of lodging market mix
- Results will ONLY be shared with those rental companies and lodging properties that participate in monthly surveys

31. Conduct visitor profile and conversion research every three years

- Changes in visitor profile and conversion need to be reviewed periodically. Therefore, RTM recommends repeating the visitor profile and conversion study every three years. It is not likely to change significantly any more frequently than the three-year period

32. Annual evaluation of inquiry point-of-origin

- Annually, RTM recommends evaluating the point-of-origin (where inquirers live) of inquirers who respond to the CCDTT’s advertising program. This reaffirms for the CCDTT it is targeting its advertising outreach placement to the most appropriate markets. This can be accomplished by maintaining a comprehensive database of all inquiries received throughout the year

33. Website research form analysis

RTM recommends the CCDTT have a “request information” page on its website and that it be visible throughout the site. Then it must add a “request for information questionnaire” on its website that requests the following information which will allow the organization to better track visitor characteristics and needs:

- Point of origin for inquirers
- Primary visitor interest(s)
- Most likely travel party size
- When planning to visit Currituck County
- Analyze the information frequently to continuously confirm other research results

Recommended Strategies

34. Annual update to Performance Review

RTM recommends the Performance Review section of this report be repeated annually and monitored for changes. The CCDTT staff can implement this. The important things to measure include:

- Increases/decreases in occupancy tax collections and tourism revenues.
- Number of inquiries generated by outreach efforts
- Changes in tourism product infrastructure (number of lodging properties and room counts, new attractions, etc.)
- Attendance to attractions
- Advertising, promotion and marketing budget for the CCDTT compared to standards established by industry organizations such as Destination Marketing Association International

35. Inquiry database “data mining”

The CCDTT is now receiving inquiries and it will have to continuously refine its methods of database development and storage to insure all inquiry data is easily accessed and reported in the future. Enhancements to current database methods include:

- All reader response inquiries received electronically and stored as an accessible electronic database
- All bulk brochure requests retained and stored in a separate database.
- All telephone inquiries not requiring fulfillment should be tracked as such and included in the database system
- All databases should be designed to be integrated for year-end reporting of total inquiry information from all sources
- Quarterly reviews of data and data mining procedure to make sure errors are caught before going unnoticed for too long

36. Research comparability with State of North Carolina

- RTM also encourages CCDTT to maintain regular contact with the state tourism division and continue to routinely compare current research findings to those available from the state. This will ensure comparability of data over the long term